Buddhism in India

Challenging Brahmanism and Caste

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Dedicated to

T.W. Rhys Davids
Caroline Augusta Foley
and
D.D. Kosambi

Contents

Preface

India in 2003 is at a turning point. On one hand, even as this book was being written, a raging 'Hindutva' force had turned the movement for 'Ram mandir' into pogroms against Muslims, spreading death and fire over the entire state of Gujarat, displaying a face of India etched in terror. On the other, growing interest in Buddhism as well as a growing reconsideration of the role of Christianity and Islam in India, is leading to a far-ranging reassessment of the cultural, spiritual and artistic heritage of the subcontinent. Questions such as 'who are we?' and 'what is really our heritage'?, questions which cut at the heart of the attempt to foist a Hindu identity on the Dalit-Bahujan masses, are being debated with new fervour.

This book grew, in an unintended and almost spontaneous process, out of the 'Dalit Visions' project sponsored by the Karuna Trust in England. 'Dalit Visions' was conceived of in discussions with G. Aloysius, Raj Kumar, Bharat Patankar and others as an open-ended project of translation that would bring forward the philosophical, ideological and historical contributions of the major men and women intellectuals of India's radical anti-caste movements. The first round of the project included translations of the writings of Jotirao Phule (Maharashtra), Iyothee Thassar (Tamil Nadu) and Bhima Bhoi (Orissa) done throughout the 1999–2002 period. These were originally to be accompanied with a survey, provided by me, of Buddhism in modern India, which would provide a framework for looking at these works. This was what turned into a project much longer than at first envisaged. Looking at Buddhism in modern India required some knowledge of the original texts; this led me first into an intensive reading of translations of Pali literature and then into looking at interpretations of these and using the perspective for a re-study of the history of ancient India. It has been an absorbing and exciting process, reshaping much of my own understanding of Indian history and society. The results are visible in the book before you.

The publication of this book is thus a culmination of over three years of research and writing, and a much longer period of discussion, debate and research on the issues involved. In some ways it is being published too soon and I am aware of the incomplete, even tentative nature of the project. Just as Buddhist stupas, carvings and caves of all kinds are continually being unearthed in various parts of India, old sources on the themes of this book are constantly coming to my attention and new studies and interpretations are constantly being published. Wherever you dig in the soil of India, Buddhist remains are likely to be found; wherever you look in the fields of scholarship and intellectual life, something new and arresting is being said. However, given the growing demand for literature on Buddhism and the Buddhist aspects of Indian history, I have felt the need to stop, to publish and throw the work open for debate.

This volume is designed both as an academic and a popular book. The aim is to communicate with a wide variety of readers of English in India, and not just with those in the universities. Therefore, diacriticals are not used in the text. There are two major reasons for this.

First, for the Indian intellectual readership, which is much wider and in some ways wiser than the academic readership, normally seen as the target of scholarly works on Indian culture and history, diacriticals are an obstacle. At the same time, they are in a way unnecessary; in most cases people generally know (or have a fairly good idea of) the pronunciation and meaning of terms used.

There is, however, a more important intellectual and methodological reason for avoiding diacriticals. The use of diacriticals very often leads to an over-precise and sometimes incorrect identification of the pronunciation of a word. This is related to the tendency to Sanskritise terminology, but it goes beyond this. Take the example of 'Asoka'. The name of India's great Buddhist emperor is commonly pronounced 'Ashoka' and written by contemporary historians and scholars with a diacritical mark over the 's'. Yet the languages that were used throughout most of India at the time would have pronounced it as 'Asoka'; 'Ashoka' would at best have been a regional (eastern) variant. The use of the Sanskritised version borrowed from the Puranic king lists, which tried to avoid all recognition of this greatest of Indian rulers, is both an anachronism and an insult. The avoidance of diacriticals in this way helps to

avoid errors and imposition. People who are used to pronouncing it as 'Ashoka' are free to continue doing so.

Even the important dental–retroflex distinction (which can only be indicated by diacriticals or awkward-looking capitalising) has both regional and social variations. For example, in modern Marathi, the 'pani-loni' words won a certain fame in the context of the non-Brahman movement: Brahmans pronounce a retroflex 'n'; non-Brahmans a dental 'n' (though today some overcompensate and use the retroflex too extensively, where the 'correct' version is dental) Beyond this there are complex north–south gradations and Dravidian elements in the use of retroflex sounds. In this case any imposition of a 'correct' pronunciation—which the use of diacriticals would force us to choose—would be wrong; the choice itself should be avoided as going counter to the linguistic insight that there is no correct versions of a language; we only have to do justice to the regularities which govern how people speak, regularities which themselves vary. Leaving the dental–retroflex distinction ambivalent for the whole series of 't', 'd', 'n' may thus paradoxically be more accurate for a book that aspires to be read throughout India.

I have used the Pali forms for most words. For many place names they are generally the more accurate even today. Two important examples are 'Paithan' and 'Taxila'. Even well-known archaeologists such as Bridget and Raymond Allchin use the form 'Pratisthana' (perhaps a compromise with the Sanskrit 'Pratishthana') for the ancient city that was Patitthana in a Sutta Nipata story that records the route travelled by the followers of the Brahman Bavari to meet the Buddha. Over a period of nearly 2500 years, the Pali form remains more accurate than the Sanskrit; it is unlikely that the city was ever known as 'Pratisthana' except to the small Brahman minority of its population. Similarly, the Pali 'Takkasila' is much closer to the modern 'Taxila' and it is doubtful if very many of its inhabitants ever called it 'Takshashila'. For many other terms, Pali is the closest to the spoken languages of the period and areas which are covered in the book.

Thus I have used 'samana' rather than 'shramana' and 'Gotama' rather than 'Gautama'. While discussing Mahayana, however, I have followed Sanskrit spelling, though again it should be remembered that many existing Mahayana texts are usually Sanskrit (or Chinese/Tibetan translations of Sanskrit) renderings of texts that

were originally in vernacular languages. For Brahmanical Sanskrit terms I have used their equivalent in the spelling that most educated Indians are familiar with—Vishnu, Shiva, Krishna. This may still do injustice to the genuinely and widely used forms of most Indian languages. For example, I have to apologise to my Dalit-Bahujan friends for the continual spelling of 'Brahman' when the pronunciation from the time of Pali and the known 'Prakrits' up through to the languages of almost all of India today is 'Bahman', 'Baaman', 'Paapan' and so forth.

I owe thanks to many friends and scholars for help during this study. To G. Aloysius, one of the pioneer writers on the revival of Buddhism in India; to Uma Chakravarty, one of the first to argue that Pali texts are an unparalleled source for the study of early India, that they represented a more realistic depiction of society than that of Vedic, shastric and other Sanskrit literature. To Sharad Patil for interpretations of early Indian society that have brought forward the role of varna/jati and matrilineal (*stri-sattak*) tendencies and for his attempt to evolve a new 'Marxist–Phule–Ambedkarite' methodology. To Bharat Patankar, for providing not only moral and intellectual stimulation and support but also a grounding in Marathi and especially Marathi Bahujan culture. To Eleanor Zelliot, not only a mother figure for so many who are working on Ambedkar and the Dalit and bhakti movements, but also a never-ending source of new insights. To Kancha Ilaiah, one of the first from among the other backward classes (OBCs) to be clear that he is not a Hindu, and who has formulated a 'Dalit Bahujan' perspective for activism and scholarship with his work on Buddhism and political philosophy. To Lokamitra and other committed Buddhists who have supported this work of enquiry. To activists of the Buddhist Circle, especially Mangesh Dahiwale, Mahesh Sagar and Sakya Ummanathan, who have been helpful in providing material, debating issues and framing questions.

For commenting on parts of the text, I thank Yoginder Sikand, Valerie Roebuck, the Buddhist Circle and others. I owe thanks to the translators of the many texts I have used, from the earliest translators of Pali texts, to scholars working on the early modern bhakti movements, to Sanskrit and Pali texts today. These include Wendy Doniger (O'Flaherty), John Hawley, Linda Hess, Charlotte Vaudeville, Eleanor Zelliot, Valerie Roebuck, as well as Shalom and Thanissaro Bhiku whose works can be found on the internet. Remarkably, most

of the best translation work today is being done by women, and the evidence provided about what 'Brahmanism' was actually saying shows why women were forbidden to read the Vedas!

Finally, I owe thanks to the cultural activists of Maharashtra, in the Dalit, Adivasi and rural cultural movements, the Vidrohi cultural movement, and all the national and international truth-seekers or satyashodhaks. Hopefully this book will take forward their work.

Introduction

Reconstructing the World

'The purpose of Religion is to explain the origin of the world. The purpose of Dhamma is to reconstruct the world' (Ambedkar 1987: 322). With these words, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the famous leader of India's untouchables, interpreted Buddhism as a world-transforming religion. This meant a threefold challenge: to Brahmanism, the main exploiting system of traditional Indian society; to Marxism, the main social ideology opposing exploitation; and to the existing interpretations of Buddhism itself.

Ambedkar had no doubt that Brahmanism was responsible for most of the evils affecting India and that Buddhism was its main potential alternative. 'The history of Indian society,' he had written in his draft essay, 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Indian Society', 'is a history of conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism.' This raised the issue of the civilisational impact of Buddhism, its role in Indian society and history. Many radical anti-caste movement leaders had been concerned with these questions for over a century, and Ambedkar's own interpretation of Indian history increasingly looked at the dialectics between Buddhism and Brahmanism.

At the same time, Ambedkar also saw the Dhamma as a fundamental alternative to Marxism. But in seeing the Dhamma as a solution to exploitation he was asking Marxist questions. His very words echoed his interpretation of Marx's famous saying in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world differently; the point, however, is to change it.' In one of his last essays on 'Buddha or Karl Marx', Ambedkar had rephrased this as 'The function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origin of the world' (Ambedkar 1987: 444). He had seen this theme as part of the small 'residue of fire' in Marxism which was still burning. But while Ambedkar's formulation of the problems of the world may have

taken inspiration from Marxism, his answers were such as to antagonise Marxists and, for that matter, most of the secularists of his time. He held out the Sangha as the ideal Communist society, and he believed that through the morality of Dhamma humans could transform themselves and reconstruct society. This was seen by Marxists as 'bourgeois idealism'; even moderate leftists of India at that time and later have looked on it as a step backward to religious solutions in what they considered to be an age of secularism, when economic and political solutions should have been emphasised.

Ambedkar's interpretation of the Buddhist Dhamma was, finally, a major challenge to the existing forms of Buddhism itself. In fact, Ambedkar himself called it Navayana, to mark its distinction from the three accepted 'ways' of Buddhism: the Theravada (or Hinayana), the Mahayana and the Vajrayana. The term has become widely accepted, and the distinction, as we shall see, was a thoroughgoing one.

The choice of Buddhism, and its reinterpretation, did not come out of a vacuum. It followed over a century-and-a-half of social radicalism, pioneered by a 'shudra', Jotirao Phule, in Maharashtra, that was marked by strong anti-caste movements both among wide sections of non-Brahmans in south and west India and among Dalits throughout India. A major theme of this wave of movements was to expose the role of Brahmanic Hinduism as the ideological-religious factor behind the caste system; a large number of leaders of these movements broke away from 'Hinduism' and looked for religious alternatives, or alternatives in atheism, as in the case of the south Indian leader Periyar. Phule himself had respect for the Buddha as a *satyapurush* or man of truth, his highest compliment, but he knew little of what the Buddha had taught. It was another Dalit leader, Pandit Iyothee Thass of Tamil Nadu, who first took up Buddhism at the beginning of the 20th century and gave it a mass base in Tamil Nadu, and in parts of Burma and South Africa settled by Dalit migrant labourers. Ambedkar's choice of Buddhism and his posing it as an alternative to Brahmanism had its basis in Indian history, but his understanding of Buddhism and his reinterpretation of it owed much to Iyothee Thass and to Laxmi Narasu, another leader of this Sakya Buddhism of the early 20th century.

When Ambedkar led thousands of Dalits for a mass vow-taking of Buddhism in 1956 in Nagpur, he did not simply propose to

lead Dalits into the fold of an already existing organisational and ideological structure. He distrusted what he knew of the existing Theravada and Mahayana Sanghas; he distrusted even more the main representative at that time of Buddhism in India, the Mahabodhi society. While Buddhism attracted him as a teaching that was equalitarian, universalist and rationalist, many of its existing expressions made him very uncomfortable. As someone very conscious that he was near death, he knew he would not be around for long to lead the movement, and wanted to provide his followers with a 'bible', a simple but comprehensive text of Buddhism, based on what he felt were the most important passages of the Pali canon. Thus, he took up, as his last work, the apparently audacious task of rewriting Buddhist scriptures.

The book he laboured to produce was *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. In it, he attempted to bring Buddhism to the world of social action and social change. Buddhism, as we shall see, was not simply spirituality for Ambedkar, but a rational and psychologically-oriented 'Dhamma' (teaching) designed to help humans live in the world and transform that world into one free from sorrow, or *dukkha*. Most of the passages of the text are taken from various sections of the Pali canon (without footnotes; Ambedkar was not writing a scholarly book) and can be traced. But some are new, interpolations aimed at providing what might be called 'Buddhist answers to Marxist questions'.

Ambedkar's death is celebrated as *mahaparinibbana* with hundreds of thousands of Dalits from throughout Maharashtra leaving their villages and urban slum homes, climbing on trains and travelling ticketless to Mumbai or Nagpur to mark his memory. He dominates the revival of Buddhism in the land of its birth. His interpretation of the Dhamma is thus not to be ignored. It provides an important entry into the question of what Buddhism is, what its impact on past Indian society was, and what its role in a future, modernised Indian society could be.

The Challenge of Navayana Buddhism

The introduction to *The Buddha and His Dhamma* shows just how radical Ambedkar's view was. In what we might call 'the four denials', Ambedkar

- rejects the traditional version of Siddhattha's Parivraja or 'going forth', arguing that the story of being moved by the sight of a dead person, a sick person, and an old person was impossible to believe since such sights must have been known to anyone;
- claims that the 'four Aryan truths'—sorrow, the origin of sorrow, the cessation of sorrow, and the way to the cessation of sorrow—are not part of the original teaching of the Buddha. 'This formula,' he states flatly, 'cuts at the root of Buddhism. If life is sorrow, death is sorrow and rebirth is sorrow, then there is an end of everything.... The four Aryan Truths are a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism';
- asserts that 'a terrible contradiction' exists between the doctrines of karma and rebirth, and the Buddha's denial of the existence of the soul;
- claims, finally, that the Bhikku can be the 'hope of Buddhism' only if he is a social servant and not a 'perfect man' (Ambedkar 1992: 2–3).

These are breathtaking and radical claims, and Ambedkar's reinterpretations are even more so.

The story of the 'going forth' for instance, is not only familiar to even fairly casual students of Buddhism, it also seems to embody a basic theme of the sociology of religion—that religion is a response to the search for meaning in the face of disease and death. Though they are very much affected by the social structure, old age, disease and death are not social ills but a part of the universal human condition. However, Ambedkar's new version has Gotama leaving to avoid a war over water between the two tribal oligarchies of Sakyas and Koliyas. Based on a traditional story recorded in the Pali canon, it provides a very 'this-worldly' interpretation, one that could even be called 'over-socialised'. And, after his initial wandering, on hearing that the warring clans have after all made peace, Gotama determines to continue his renunciation and search, saying, in Ambedkar's words,

> The problem of war is a problem of conflict. It is only part of a larger problem. This conflict is going on not only between kings and nations but between nobles and Brahmans, between householders, between [friends and family members].... The conflict between nations is

> occasional. But the conflict between classes is constant and perpetual. It is this which is the root of all suffering in the world. I have to find a solution to this problem of social conflict (Ambedkar 1992: 57–58).

Thus, in Ambedkar's interpretation, Gotama's search begins with the Marxist problem of social exploitation and class struggle!

Ambedkar's version of the answer that the Buddha found appears equally radical. His denial that *dukkha*, sorrow or suffering, was central to Buddhism comes from his acceptance of the widespread notion that the idea involves a pessimistic view of the world and leads to escapism. Ambedkar apparently took this criticism so seriously that he was ready to deny what many (including most of the earliest Buddhists) have seen as the essence of Buddhism, viz., the four noble truths. Ambedkar argues that far from asserting that sorrow and suffering are inevitable characteristics of the existing world, the purpose of Buddhism is to end suffering in this world. In his version, the Buddha's first sermon is not a proclamation of the truths but of the 'middle path', rejecting asceticism on the one hand and indulgence in worldly luxury on the other, followed by the statement of a simple but noble morality. He has the Buddha say,

> No doubt my Dhamma recognizes the existence of suffering but forget not that it also lays equal stress on the removal of suffering. My Dhamma has in it both hope and purpose. Its purpose is to remove Avijja, by which I mean ignorance of the existence of suffering. There is hope in it because it shows the way to put an end to human sufferings (Ambedkar 1992: 130).

And then the five Parivrajakas greet this first sermon by saying, 'never in the history of the world has salvation been conceived as the blessing of happiness to be attained by man in this life and on this earth by righteousness born out of his own efforts!' (Ambedkar 1992: 130–31). This is, again, a radical departure from the story told in all other forms of Buddhism.

Ambedkar's desire to have a Buddhism without 'karma' (*kamma* in Pali) as linked to rebirth in the conventional understanding of it is also radical. It is understandable, since on the one hand, the concept of the karma/rebirth link is a metaphysical assumption for which there cannot be any scientific evidence, while on the other hand, it can be used in almost any society to convince believers

to accept their social lot and in India, specifically, to justify the caste system. 'If you accept karma,' say militant neo-Buddhists in India today, 'you are accepting that you are an Untouchable because of your sins in previous births.' Therefore, they reject the whole notion. In doing so, Ambedkar and his contemporary followers argue that the notion of karma/rebirth contradicts the basic Buddhist theme of *anatta*, the non-existence of an eternal soul, but while doing so they have to ignore and implicitly deny much of the classical interpretations of Theravada Buddhism.

Just as he reinterprets *dukkha* in social terms, Ambedkar seeks to reinterpret karma, at one point referring to it as biological-genetic inheritance, but more generally that the transmission of karmic causality is social and moral, not individual:

> The theory of the law of Kamma does not necessarily involve the conception that the effect of the Kamma recoils on the doer of it.... Individuals come and individuals go. But the moral order of the universe remains and so also the law of Kamma which sustains it (Ambedkar 1992: 244).

Is this convincing? In spite of the apparent contradiction between *anatta* and the karma/rebirth cosmology, it is still difficult to imagine Buddhism without it. Rejecting the karma/rebirth concept would mean that we take this only as a historically derivative aspect of the Indian environment of early Buddhism and not as a universal and essential aspect of the Buddha's teachings.

Ambedkar's fourth point, that the Sangha should be a community dedicated to social service, seems to go counter to the traditional notion of any monastic organisation in which the primary goal is the spiritual self-realisation of its members. Early Buddhism seems quite unambiguous about this goal of the Sangha, which was aimed at providing a framework for existence that would make individual control of the passions—the major step towards liberation—possible. The social-historical characteristics of much of Buddhist monasticism provide a background for Ambedkar's position. Ambedkar was clearly disturbed about the way the Sangha was functioning in Burma and Ceylon. Further, he was apparently individualistic enough to have hesitated to submit to an organisation: even at the time of his own *diksha*, it appears that he had to be convinced to 'take refuge' in the Sangha as well as the Buddha

and the Dhamma, and immediately afterwards, in spite of being an unauthorised lay devotee, he himself turned around to administer *diksha* to the hundreds of thousands of gathered masses (Sangharakshata 1986: 136–37).

It frequently seems as if Ambedkar approached Buddhism not with the heart of faith but with the scalpel of a practical reformer, and seemed to believe that he could take what he wanted and leave the rest. He openly adopted the role not of a simple believer but of a charismatic leader, claiming authority for himself. He had his arguments. The guiding principle he puts forward for what he takes and what he rejects is simple. Arguing that there were after all numerous interpolations in the texts and corruptions of time, he goes on to say of the Buddha, 'There is, however one test which is available. If there is anything which could be said with confidence it is: He was nothing if not rational, if not logical. Anything therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal, may be taken to be the word of the Buddha' (Ambedkar 1992: 350–51).

Is this simply Enlightenment rationality in the guise of religion? Is it going too far? It is more radical than, for instance, other 'engaged Buddhists' mentioned by Christopher Queen and Sallie King in their study of new Buddhist movements in Asia (1996). Most of these modern 'liberation' forms of Buddhism give new social interpretations of Buddhism; none challenge what have been considered to be basic doctrines. Sangharakshata's Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (in India, the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangh Gana Vinayak Samiti or TBMSG), the only pre-existing Buddhist order to actively support Dalit Buddhism, and one whose equivalent to bhikkus, known as 'dhammacharis', wear everyday clothes and live the married life, does not go this far. It innovates, but justifies this as the adaption of Buddhism to different cultures; it claims to accept all the existing schools or yanas of the Dhamma. Ambedkar, in contrast, seems ready to challenge them all!

Nevertheless, we will argue that Ambedkar should be taken seriously.

Buddhism as Rational and Historical

There are two major points of interpretation at issue here which need to be examined.

The first has to do with the approach to religion. Ambedkar's Buddhism seemingly differs from that of those who accept by faith, who 'go for refuge' and accept the canon. This much is clear from its basis: it does not accept in totality the scriptures of the Theravada, the Mahayana or the Vajrayana. The question that is then clearly put forth: is a fourth *yana*, a Navayana, a kind of modernistic Enlightenment version of the Dhamma really possible within the framework of Buddhism?

The second basic difference is that between the historical, psychologically and socially oriented this-worldly interpretation of the Buddha and his Dhamma, and an ahistorical, spiritualistic, cosmological one. For instance, the Buddha to Ambedkar is a man, though definitely an unusual and compelling one, and the goal of the teachings is oriented to social reconstruction and individual advance in this life.

As far as the point of 'methodology' is concerned—faith versus reason in looking at religion—it can be noted that all great religious thinkers (who have not claimed to found 'new' teachings) have reinterpreted their traditions. This interpretation/reinterpretation may be done consciously or in the belief that one is recovering a 'true' religion. Interpretation within the Buddhist tradition itself was originally done by the group who carried on the Sangh after Gotama's death and collected the first 'scriptures' which came to constitute the Pali canon. There is enough uncertainty in what the words of the Buddha really were, in terms of standards of historical scholarship, to make various interpretations possible. Quite likely these first interpretations which gave birth to Theravada Buddhism depended much on the 'common-sense' religious–philosophical thinking of the time, including the karma/rebirth framework, which Gotama himself may have been attempting to transcend. Reinterpretation was done again, perhaps more 'consciously,' by many followers of the Mahayana, with brilliant thinkers such as Nagarjuna taking the lead themselves, to deconstruct and displace the 'four noble truths' from their position of centrality, while parallel trends developed that transformed the Buddha into a cosmological and transcendent central figure more important than any divinity. Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism represented a further reinterpretation. Finally in the period of the modern revival of Buddhism in India and elsewhere, there are radical reinterpretations by Sangharakshata (in changing the nature of the Buddhist

order), and in India not only by Ambedkar himself but also by Iyothee Thass and Laxmi Narasu, who pioneered the idea that 'karma' could be separated from rebirth.

In regard to the approach to religion generally and to the Dhamma specifically, we might note the famous last words of the Buddha (given in the *Mahaparinibanna suttanta)* at the time he was facing his death:

> *What, then, Ananda? does the Order expect of me? I have preached the truth without making any distinction between exoteric and esoteric doctrines…Should there be any one who harbours the thought, 'It is I who will lead the brotherhood,' or 'The Order is dependent on me,' he is the one who should lay down instructions concerning the Order. Now the Tathagata, Ananda, thinks not that it is he who should lead the brotherhood, or that the Order is dependent on him. Why then should he leave instructions in any matter concerning the Order? I too, O Ananda, am now grown old and full of years; my journey is drawing to its close, I have reached my sum of days, I am turning eighty years old and just as a worn-out cart, Ananda, can be kept going only with the help of thongs, so the body of the Tathagata can only be kept going by bandaging it up…*
>
> *Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourselves. And how, Ananda, is a brother to be a lamp unto himself, a refuge to himself…. Herein, O mendicants, a brother continues, as to the body, so to look upon the body that he remains strenuous, self-possessed and mindful, having overcome both the hankering and the dejection common in the world. [And in the same way] as to feelings…moods…ideas, he remains strenuous, self-possessed and mindful, having overcome both the hankering and the dejection common in the world. And whosoever, Ananda, whether now or after I am dead, shall be a lamp unto themselves, and a refuge unto themselves, shall betake themselves to no external refuge, but holding fast to the Truth as their lamp and holding fast as their refugee to the truth…it is they, Ananda, among my bhikkus, who shall reach the very topmost height! But they must be anxious to learn* (*Digha Nikaya* 2, 1941: 107–09).

These are radical words themselves, and very different from the teachings of any other founder of a well-known religion. The follower is urged to rely on himself/herself, that is on his/her own

intellect and experience. That means he/she should not rely on scriptures, nor on authority. What is the scientific method but the effort to use intellect and experience in the most thorough and sophisticated way possible? The urge to self-reliance seems to go against the notion of taking the 'three jewels' as refuge, in the sense of an authority to which one submits.

This advocacy of self-reliance is at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. 'Salvation' or liberation from the bonds of the world does not come through faith, through submitting to authority, through ritual, or any of the traditional forms of religion: but rather through self-control, experiment and individual effort. As the *Dhammapada* puts it,

> *By ourselves is evil done,*
> *By ourselves we pain endure,*
> *By ourselves we cease from wrong,*
> *By ourselves become we pure.*
> *No one frees us but ourselves,*
> *No one can and no one may,*
> *We ourselves must tread the Path,*
> *Buddhas only show the way* (see Smith 1998: 34).

The final words of the Buddha—'all conditioned things are transitory; strive with diligence'—urge control of self and struggling, but not necessarily withdrawal from or rejection of the world.

In fact, an examination of the Buddha and his teachings historically has been sanctioned by some of the traditions of Buddhism itself. These show that the Buddha himself relativised or historicised his Dhamma. In the famous story on his reluctance about taking women into the Sangha, or setting up a Bhikkuni Sangha, Anand finally convinces the Buddha to do so, but the gloomy reply is,

> *If, Ananda, women had not received permission to go out from the household life and enter the homeless state, under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata, then would the pure religion, Ananda, have lasted long, the good law would have stood fast for a thousand years. But since, Ananda, women have now received that permission, the pure religion, Ananda, will not now last so long, the good law will now stand fast for only five hundred years. Just, Ananda, as houses in which there are many women and but few men are easily violated by robber burglars, just so, Ananda, under*

> *whatever doctrine and discipline women are allowed to go out from the household life into the homeless state, that religion will not last long*. (Vinaya III 1885: 325–26)

This certainly is male chauvinism; it may be taken as the recognition by the Buddha of a patriarchal social reality (i.e. that women did not have the collective social strength at that time to defend the Dhamma) or it may be explained as a later interpolation. But aside from this, the statement reveals something else: a clear consciousness that the history of Dhamma is not one of eternal triumph or inevitable progression, but that it, like all phenomena, has an origin, a decline, an ending; it is historical and transient. This was part of Buddhism's collective self-understanding, and can be seen in later writings such as those of the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang. It seems there was a consciousness that the Dhamma was a phenomenon with only a certain time period, that it would fade away in India itself.

This shows a historicisation that was already a part of the earliest tradition. Why 500 years? That would put the period of 'defeat' around the 1st century CE—the period when Mahayana was rising, or perhaps more accurately, of growing absolutist trends within Buddhism (Kalupahana 1997). The 500 years after that—when Buddhism apparently remained strong enough to contend fully with Brahmanism for control in India, could be seen as illusory; the heart, the core of the teaching was gone.... In any case, the whole conception of a teaching that was expected to die away raises interesting questions that require deeper historical enquiry.

Current Scholarship and the 'Essence' of Buddhism

Many recent scholarly studies of early Buddhism raise equally radical questions about the interpretation of 'basic Buddhism' and cast some positive light on Ambedkar's interpretations. Among minor points, as pointed out by Richard Gombrich, is that the early sections of the Pali canon does not include the story of Gotama leaving home due to the sight of an aged, diseased, and dead man; and even the name Siddhattha is not known (1997: 75). He further points out that there is some questioning among scholars about

whether there is any 'essential' feature of Buddhism at all—and the only answer Gombrich can give to this is the historical derivation from the teachings of Gotama (ibid.: 6–7). If this is true, any interpretation which grows out of Buddhism historically, including that of Ambedkar, could stand.

Of the more fundamental issues, a group of scholars recently have been questioning some of the usual interpretations of karma/rebirth, the goal of *nibbana* and other themes. For example, in her book Carol Anderson illustrates a tradition that relativises the idea that the 'four noble truths' constitute a foundational aspect of Buddhism. She notes the argument that the search for such a 'basic doctrine' reflects a 'westernised' interpretation. She backs her arguments with linguistic evidence to claim that in their original form the four truths were simply mentioned as: this is pain, this is the origin of pain, this is the ending of pain, this is the path leading to the ending of pain. They were thus only somewhat later described as 'noble truths'. And she concludes that the evidence demonstrates that the four noble truths were probably not part of the earliest strata of what came to be recognised as Buddhism, but rather emerged as a central teaching throughout the world of Indian Buddhism in a period around the middle of the first millennium (Anderson 1999: 20–21).

What about the question of pessimism and other-worldliness? The idea that Buddhism is both pessimistic and idealistic is summed up by Deviprasad Chattopadhya, whose work *Lokayata* gives one of the most influential Marxist interpretations of first-millennium thinking, including Buddhism. He arrives at the conclusion on the basis of the 'Four Aryan Truths' and the interpretation of the cause and end of suffering through the doctrine of *paticca samuppada* (Sanskrit *pratitya samutpada*, the chain of causation), and then quotes a sutta on 'tears' (the *Assu Sutta* of the *Samyutta Nikaya*) in which the Buddha describes graphically and with great emotive power the sufferings that all beings undergo through innumerable lives, journeying from inscrutable beginnings, shedding tears for the death of loved ones again and again. Chattopadhyaya then writes, 'Before such a story of the beginningless, fabulous and fantastic misery, the actual miseries arising from the new social conditions paled into insignificance' and concludes that

> Thus, with all his express distaste for metaphysical speculations, the Buddha laid a foundation for a grand system of speculative

> metaphysics. And like all systems of metaphysics, it also created a halo in the brightness of which all the details of felt experiences lost their reality and meaning. The ultimate cause of all human sufferings was traced to *avidya* or ignorance, i.e. the sufferings became the phantom of imagination. The problem was solved simply by removing it from the realm of reality (Chattopadhyaya 1981: 504).

There are, however, many problems with this interpretation. First, Chattopadhyaya ignores all the history of Buddhist scholarship, going back over a century, which analyses Buddhist texts sufficiently to make the citation of evidence from any one source problematical. ('Deconstruction' begins early in Buddhism, certainly with Nagarjuna, possibly with the Buddha himself, and even more clearly with Buddhist scholars of the modern era such as T.W. Rhys Davids and Carolyn Augusta Foley). Second, the very sutta he quotes concludes with a hopeful note: 'Long have you experienced stress, experiences pain, experienced loss—enough to become disenchanted with all fabricated things, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released.' Finally, in his haste to give a Marxist interpretation of the teaching of *dukkha* as arising due to the experience of the social exploitation of a newly arising class society, Chattapadhyaya ignores the issue of individual sorrow and suffering. Death, disease and old age are human realities that would continue even in a classless society. The karma/rebirth cosmology does not add anything essential to the issue of the vulnerability of the individual before the universe.

It is true that this karma/rebirth-based vast cosmology of human suffering was part of the thinking of Indians in the first millennium BCE. However, the question remains, can the Dhamma make sense without it? Is it not a fact, as many have argued, that many aspects of the Buddha's teaching—especially the idea of *anatta*, ('no soul')—contradict it? Ultimately the question is whether the main teachings of the Buddha should be given a psychological interpretation or a spiritualistic, cosmological one.

Another recent study, that by Grace Burford, directly takes up the issue of a 'this-worldly' interpretation of Buddhism. She argues from a textual analysis of one of the earliest Pali texts, (the *Atthakavagga* of the *Sutta-Nipata*), that there is a conflict of ultimate values in the Theravada tradition. She shows that the teachings about the goal of seeking and the path to it given in this text

are different from the two major later commentaries on it, and argues that by adding the cosmological theory of karma/rebirth, the Theravada Buddhist value theory lost coherence. In the early text the goal is a positive system of values which is this-worldly, immanent and life-affirming. In this, little or no connection is drawn between the ideal goal (*nibbana*) and metaphysical consequences or benefits of attaining the ideal, such as escape from repeated birth, old age, and death (Burford 1991: 12). The commentaries retain this life-affirming view but add to it the 'world-denying, transcendent system of values' of escape from birth and death. This leads to a problem both for scholars and for believer-practitioners because, as Burford believes, the value system must be coherent if Buddhism is to be capable of leading believer-practitioners to the attainment of the goal and is to be accepted as truthful. Her solution is to reject the transcendental metaphysical claims as being interpolations and interpretations by the early Sangha, and returning to an original Buddhism as it is recorded in the *Atthakavagga* (ibid.: 7).

Like Ambedkar, Carol Burford argues that the 'true' classical Buddhism is life-affirming; that escape from the birth-and-death round is a peripheral preoccupation. Her position, currently being debated in Buddhist scholarship, gives scholarly support for understanding Buddhism in a new way, much as Ambedkar did.

There is one more reason for considering seriously Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism. It is an important heuristic device. It requires something like the 'thought-experiment' perhaps comparable to that commonly used by physicists: can we 'think' the Buddhist Dhamma without the cosmological framework of karma/rebirth, in isolation from the social-cultural conditions of the first millennium BCE in India? This is precisely what Ambedkar's 'Navayana' Buddhism requires us to do. Doing this assumes that a religion or 'teaching' is not simply a reflection of its period, that it is not simply infinitely flexible in how it functions in regard to society, that it has an essential core to it. (Saying this need not lead us to the kind of metaphysical belief in 'essences' which Buddhism denied; it is only saying that there is something that, without which we would not call a set of phenomena 'Buddhism'). For example, I would argue that classical 'Hinduism'/Brahmanism has an essential core which frames all the local traditions and cults it absorbs as well as the sometimes grandiose morality it teaches, and that this

essential core includes support for varnashrama dharma and a belief that the *atman* and *brahma* are one. Without these two points, 'Hinduism' would be something else.

The issue of 'Navayana Buddhism' provokes us to ask certain questions about Buddhism: what is its essential core, without which we would no longer be able to call it 'Buddhism' or 'the Dhamma taught by the Buddha'? Does it include the karma/rebirth notions, or not? Answers to such questions will allow us to separate out 'Buddhism' from other ideological and religious trends in Indian culture and history and will also provide resources to answer further questions about the civilisational impact of Buddhism in India and elsewhere.

Buddhism and Brahmanism in Indian History

The other important point in Ambedkar's Buddhist renaissance had to do with his concern for the development of India as a whole. In arguing that the basic conflict was between 'Buddhism and Brahmanism', he was making an important intervention in debates on the question of Indian identity. Most Indian intellectuals of his time and even today have seen this as basically a 'Hindu' identity, in which all the various religions and sects originating in the Indian subcontinent are viewed as having a basic unity that is characterised by their flexible and comprehensive view of the divine and of the ultimate identity between the divine and the human soul. This is then contrasted to the 'western' religions which see a separation between man and God, and between man and nature, religions that are based on monotheistic, sectarian and individualistic world-views. Buddhism, according to this position, is basically similar to Hinduism in its major themes.

The term 'Hindu' was originally a geographical one, deriving from the river Sindh, used because the first 'foreigners', the Iranians, pronounced 's' as 'h' (so that *asura*, a word that came to refer to the demons in contrast to the gods of the Vedic Aryans, became *ahura,* the name used for the supreme god in Zoroastrianism). During the Mughal period, it was often used to classify together all the diverse indigenous religious groups. During the time of British rule, the nationalist elite themselves took up the term to identify their religion

as 'Hinduism'. 'Hinduism' was seen in various ways, but usually as a flexible, amorphous collection of all the existing cults and sects, with roots in the Vedas and unified by a vague Vedantic idea of the 'being' at the heart of it all, and of the individual soul being identical with this universal being. The originators of the 'Hindutva' position argued openly that a 'Hindu was someone who accepted India as his holy land and as his father land', but even the more reformist nationalist elite took Hinduism, in effect, as a 'national religion'. This is implied in Gandhi's argument that untouchables should not convert to other religions, rather they should try to reform 'their own' religion.

In this formulation of a 'modern Hinduism', the question of the relationship between Hinduism and caste was evaded, though the word *dharma* was often used as the translation of 'religion,' and one of the most essential meanings of *dharma* has referred to *varnashrama dharma*. Reformists and conservatives alike usually took the position that the original caste system had been a fairly harmonious way of integrating the various ethnic and linguistic groups in India, and that it was only in the modern period that it had 'degenerated' into thousands of rigid jatis. Thus the solution was a recovery or return to an idealised varna system. Even Jawaharlal Nehru is inclined to make apologies for the caste system, which he views along with the village and the joint family in his *Discovery of India* as one of the 'pillars of Indian society'. 'Caste has been essentially functional and similar to the medieval trade guilds of Europe' (Nehru 1959: 150). Similarly, stressing the harmonious character of Indian thinking and collective character of its social system, he writes,

> The old Indian social structure thus had some virtues, and indeed it could not have lasted so long without them. Behind it lay the philosophical ideal of Indian culture—the integration of man and the stress on goodness, beauty, and truth rather than acquisitiveness.... The duties of the individual and group were emphasized, not their rights (Nehru 1959: 160–61).

Thus, Indian thinking is contrasted with western thinking, individualism with collectivism or cooperation, and spiritualism with materialism. These contrasts were as handy for 'secular' socialists as for the more open 'Hindu nationalists' because they appeared to provide an important indigenous basis for socialist thinking.

Buddhism, for most of those who now defined themsleves as Hindus, was most often seen as a kind of protestant Hinduism. In their view, it arose out of the basic philosophical ideas of early 'Hinduism'; it protested against the ritualism and violence of Vedic sacrifices and the rigidities of the caste system; but these protests either won their point (as Vedic sacrifices were done away with and vegetarianism became a way of life for the Brahmanic elite) or were carried on through the ages by the bhakti movement and by other reformers. Buddhism died away finally because there was no need for it in the truly open 'catholicism' of existing Hinduism. Buddhism was not essentially different; many argued in particular that the Mahayana concept of *sunyata* (no essential nature) was practically identical with the Vedantic 'brahma'.

This developing 'Hindu' ideology was contested by a vigorous anti-caste movement that arose in the 19th and 20th centuries, beginning with Jotirao Phule in Maharashtra and Iyothee Thass in Tamil Nadu. This developed into strong non Brahman movements in the two regions, and an even more widely spread, if sporadic, Dalit movements by the 1920s. Central to the thinking of the intellectuals of these movements was the concept of contradiction as a basic feature of Indian society and history. Not only were exploitation, struggle, violence and dominance prominent realities, but also the various religious and philosophical systems that had sprung up on Indian soil contained contradictory elements.

Ambedkar was building on this tradition. While he used the term 'Hinduism' in most of his writings—accepting the reality that by the 20th century most Indians had accepted the definition of themselves as 'Hindus', still in defining the contradictions in Indian society he used the term 'Brahmanism' to emphasise the crucial role played by the concepts of Brahmanic superiority and caste hierarchy. Brahmanism's unique characteristic was to foster all those features; Buddhism opposed them. Brahmanism emphasised magic and ritual, while Buddhism emphasised rationality and ethics. The conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism was seen as of the utmost interest to Dalits in particular, because it was in the process of defeating Buddhism that the caste system solidified, and certain specific groups were particularly degraded and classed as 'untouchable'. Thus Ambedkar argued that Dalits were in fact originally Buddhists who had been rendered untouchable and their

being deprived of access to resources was part of the ongoing civilisational conflict.

All of this had its basis in earlier thinkers of the anti-caste movements. Phule had stressed, though in different language, the centrality of Brahmanic ideology in enslaving the masses; he had seen the Buddha as perhaps the most important early fighter against this enslavement. The Tamil Dalit-Buddhist leader Iyothee Thass not only founded his own Buddhist movement; he also identified Dalits with Buddhists by arguing that the Tamil Paraiyas were not only Buddhists, but descendents of the Buddha's own clan, the Sakyas. By the 1920s this identification with early Buddhists was an underlying theme among many Dalit movements, especially in south India, and was seen in the context of theories about Aryan conquest of an equalitarian, non-Aryan indigenous society. In this interpretation, acceptance of Buddhism by Dalits (and in some versions, by non-Brahmans as well) would not really be 'conversion' to a new religion, but liberation and a return to their original identity.

Religion and Modernity

Ambedkar's 'challenge to Marxism'—taking the Dhamma as an alternative to radical socialism—was more than just that; it was also a challenge to almost all the conventional sociological understanding of his time. Modernity, it was thought, was secular in the sense of being non-religious; the age of industrialism brought with it science and skepticism about all religions. It was generally believed in the 1950s and 1960s that traditional forms of religion would slowly die away. Marx considered religion a part of the superstructure that would vanish almost automatically when social equality was genuinely established; Weber wrote of the all-pervading 'disenchantment with the world' as characteristic of bureaucratic rationality. Most sociologists of the time believed that the processes of 'secularism' would deprive religion of its importance in social life.

Ambedkar thought differently—that religion, backing up a moral code, was a necessity for society. Just as Brahmanic Hinduism had been the root cause of the subjection of the untouchables, indeed of India's backwardness, so it could not simply be rectified by a socio-economic development that would render religion unnecessary. A

new, moral and rationalistic religion, or 'Dhamma', was required. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma* he wrote,

> Society has to choose one of three alternatives. Society may choose not to have any Dhamma as an instrument of government.... This means Society chooses the road to anarchy. Secondly, Society may choose the police, i.e. dictatorship, as an instrument of Government. Third, Society may choose Dhamma plus the Magistrate whenever people fail to observe the Dhamma. In anarchy and dictatorship liberty is lost, only in the third liberty survives. Those who want liberty must therefore have Dhamma (Ambedkar 1992: 317).

At this point Ambedkar appears close to the functionalists who emphasise the necessity of a value system to provide social integration. More specifically, it recalls the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Of all of the 'founding fathers' of sociology, Durkheim, in his last great work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, gave the most careful definition of religion taking it as involving the 'sacred' (as Ambedkar had noted, the Dhamma was 'sacred morality') and as serving the function of social integration. In contrast to Marx and Weber, he did not believe religion would vanish with the progression of modernity, but that a new and rational religion would develop to give a moral basis to the values of rationality and individualism. The 'religion of science' hailed at the time of the French revolution was, he argued, a forerunner of this (Durkheim 1965: 37–63, 474–76).

The Navayana Buddhism of Ambedkar is, in fact, a startling example of Durkheim's projected religion of rationality.

Prospectus

The following chapters of 'Buddhism in India' will take up these themes, focusing on the question of what is the 'core' element in the Buddhist Dhamma, on what Buddhism has meant for the development of Indian civilisation, and on the role of Buddhism in a modern, industrial age.

Chapter 1 will examine the background to the rise of Buddhism in the middle of the second millennium BCE, in a period when

crucial cultural and social developments took place throughout the world. We will look at the social, economic and cultural characteristics of the society of the time, at its political context, and at the competing religious–ideological trends within which Buddhism functioned, primarily the samana (Sanskrit *shramana*) and Brahmanic traditions.

In Chapter 2, we will argue that the teachings of the Buddha (as given in the early Theravada Pali scriptures) places a unique emphasis on control of the passions, on achieving freedom from 'craving' as crucial elements in achieving liberation from sorrow and suffering. We will also argue that in contrast to both Brahmanism and its main ethical competitor Jainism, it provided for a simple but positive morality for lay followers as well as for those who became bhikkus or renouncers. Buddhism also contrasted radically with Brahmanism in regard to the caste system (that is the controversy over the role of birth versus action in determining social status), the origin and role of the state, the approach to merchants and farmers as social groups, and the position of women.

Chapter 3 will look at 'transitions,' the changing forms of Buddhism in India. This includes both popular Buddhism as contrasted with the Buddhism of the monasteries, and also with the changes in forms brought by Mahayana and Vajrayana (or Tantric) Buddhism.

Chapter 4 will examine the civilisational impact of Buddhism, its formative role for nearly a millennium, its relationship to caste and the origins of caste, its connection with India's leading role in trade and other international linkages in the 'first global age', and the question of how religious–philosophical systems foster or discourage scientific and technological advances. We will argue that Buddhism fostered a dynamic, open society in contrast to Brahmanism's orientation to a hierarchical, village-focused and caste-defined social system. A brief examination of the theories of Weber and Marx on religion and socio-economic development will bring out the crucial role of Buddhism in providing a moral framework for such a society.

Chapter 5 will discuss the defeat of Buddhism in India, a major problem for social research, and one in which major Indian and Western thinkers on Buddhism have put forward important theses. In contrast to most of these, it will argue that the defeat did not occur

because of a Buddhist 'decadence' or an alienation from society that came about with the development of Mahayana Buddhism, or simply because Brahmanism proved extremely adaptive and could counter the attractions of Buddhism with those of the bhakti movement. Rather the most important factor in the defeat of Buddhism was the formation of an alliance between Brahmans and rising kings who made use of Brahman administrative service and could get their status as Kshatriyas confirmed without any of the burdens of being a moral king. The chapter will also look at the role of violence in the establishment of the dominance of Brahmanism and the relationship between Islam and Buddhism.

Chapter 6 will look at the complex question of impact of Buddhism in the centuries following its overt disappearance and consider what some term its 'underground survival'. Here the relationship between Buddhism and the bhakti movements is a crucial issue since these were major religious currents among the people in the so-called 'medieval' period of Indian society. We will look at Nandanar in the Tamil bhakti tradition, at Kabir and Ravidas in north India, at Tukaram and Cokhamela in Maharashtra, at Mirabai and the role of women in bhakti movements, and at some aspects of the Orissa bhakti movements. We will argue that the social situation during the bhakti movement, which resulted in repression and perhaps murder of radical bhaktas such as Tukaram, and the effort to totally wipe out the contributions of Dalit bhaktas such as Nandanar and Cokamela, illustrated the dominance of Brahmanism and the hardening of caste social structure in medieval India.

Chapter 7 will examine the first period of the revival of Buddhism in the 19th century. We will see what Buddhism meant to the great social radical Jotiba Phule, and then examine individual conversions and their limitations, and finally discuss the Dalit-based Tamil Buddhist revival in the early decades of the 20th century.

Chapter 8 will describe the meaning of Ambedkar's Buddhism and the massive Dalit conversions of the 1950s and after, in the context of their significance for the future of Buddhism in India.

Finally, in Conclusion we will return to the questions raised in this introductory chapter, and argue that an interpretation of Buddhism, without the framework of karma/rebirth, interpreting

nibbana in this-worldly terms, focusing on the psychological and moral development of the individual and the 'reconstruction of the world' (what I called the effort to achieve 'Sukhavati now'), does indeed make sense. Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism can thus find a genuine base in the original teachings of Gotama, and serve as a powerful force for reconstructing society in a new and challenging millennium.

1

The Background to Buddhism

The Buddha

'So, Ananda, you must be your own lamps, be your own refuges.... Hold firm to the truth as a lamp and a refuge, and do not look for refuge to anything but yourselves.' With these final instructions to his disciples, Siddhattha Gotama, known as the Buddha, entered his *mahaparinibbana*, now estimated to have been between 400–350 BCE.[1] His last words to his disciples were 'All complex phenomenon are transitory. Strive with diligence.'

Born nearly 80 years earlier as Gotama to an aristocratic family of the Sakya tribal oligarchy (and therefore called Sakyamuni, the 'holy man of the Sakyas') in what is now Nepal, he had left home at the age of 29 to search for the truth behind suffering and death, beginning a life of almost ceaseless wandering. At first this meant joining the already existing groups of wandering renouncers, or samanas; here he sought answers to the problem of human suffering, learned techniques of meditation, and, in his last group, endured agonising austerities. Finding the answers, the techniques and the austerities futile, he abandoned them and struck out on his own, and finally sat down under a pipal tree, considered sacred since the time of the Indus civilisation, resolving not to move until he had won his way through to liberation. It was then, on the banks of a river in what is now Bodh Gaya that he attained Enlightenment. Tradition records that at first he was reluctant to teach, but convinced

[1] 486 BCE has been the date accepted up to now by most Indian and other scholars. However more recent evidence suggests a significantly later date (Cousins 1996; Keay 2001: 62–63).

by the god Brahma and out of compassion for the sufferings of humanity, he 'turned the wheel of the Dhamma' and preached his first sermon at the Deer Park at Sarnath to his initially sceptical five former companions. Slowly he gathered disciples around him from all walks of life, from wealthy merchants and Brahmans and fellow Ksatriyas to the disregarded poor, lowly-born workers and women. He initiated the men and organised them into a Bhikku Sangha, or order of monks, and then with reluctance, admitted women to form a Bhikkuni Sangha. His time was spent in peripatetic teaching, both in rural solitude and in well populated and wealthy urban centers, wandering for most of the year except during the rainy season. He finally died after an attack of dysentery resulting from a meal given by a metal-worker. The words of the Japanese Zen monk-poet Ryokan poignantly capture his achievement,

> Even if a man lives a hundred years
> His life is like a floating weed, drifting with the waves
> East and west continually, no time for rest.
> Sakyamuni renounced nobility and devoted his life to
> Preventing others from falling into ruin.
> On earth eighty years,
> Proclaiming the Dharma for fifty,
> Bestowing the sutras as an eternal legacy;
> Today, still a bridge to cross over to the other shore (*Ryokan* 1988).

Millennium Magic

The background to the striking life and work of Gotama 'Sakyamuni' is important. We feel in the 21st century we are in a new millennium, standing on the threshold of a new era. While dating from the 'Christian era'—a mistaken date for Christ's birth at that—is arbitrary, there is a sense in which a new global age, with new promises and new dangers, is opening up before human society. Having gone through capitalist industrialisation, the nation state, international wars and the first great failed attempt at socialism, new linkages are being built, new technologies experimented with, new social desires expressed. Humanity appears to be poised on the threshold of an expansion into both external and internal space.

The middle of the first millennium BCE similarly represented a new era and turning point, not only in India but throughout the

world. It was an age of emerging consciousness of the individual in the backdrop of social upheaval, when from China to Greece new technologies, new social energies and cultural innovations burst forth. It was also a period which seemed to have aeons behind it. The first great age of civilisation, the Bronze Age cities built on the flood plains of rivers, had passed. The first great waves of migration and invasions had swept across the Euro-Asiatic plains and mountains; the primarily Indo-European 'Bronze Age barbarians' brought new turmoil with their horses, chariots and weapons. As these settled, they interacted with urban civilisations and cleared forests with the help of iron ploughs to spread agriculture farther, surplus developed, population expanded, new large and small urban centres multiplied, and trade grew. With increased mobility of individuals within changing social formations, new ideas developed and spread. The individual and the cosmos became subjects of new questioning.

In India, these developments centered in the Gangetic valley, eastwards of the Punjab and Indus valley areas where the first civilisational development and cultural contacts had taken place. India was at the time a mixture of ethnic and linguistic groups—Dravidian (Tamil),[2] Aryan, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic. All of them played some role in the Gangetic valley, and the languages of the people developed not only on the basis of the Sanskritic background, as is often thought, but equally, if not more, influenced by and other linguistic traditions, especially Tamil, the most ancient form of the Dravidian languages.

These developments took place not in a vacuum, but on the foundation of a long history of social-cultural developments in the subcontinent. These broadly consisted of two streams, the Indic and the Vedic.

The 'Indic' refers to the Indus valley civilisation, one of the oldest in the world, centering in the Indus valley in Pakistan, in a region that was to later become a Buddhist stronghold, one that very likely

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[2] Although the term 'Dravidian' is now used for the family of languages and 'Tamil' is limited to one of them, it is arguably more ancient. The term 'Dravidian' is itself a Sanskritisation and we can trace the processes through which the word 'Tamil' became 'Damila,' 'Damida' and 'Dravida.' The 1st century Greek marital text, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, uses the term 'Dachinabades' for the Deccan, from which 'Damirica' or the Tamil country seems to be excluded.

had some form of Dravidian as its main language. This is known as the 'Indus civilisation', but it appears that the Mesopotamians with whom its inhabitants traded knew it as 'Meluhha', a word that later entered Sanskrit as '*mleccha*', standing for the foreigner or barbarian (Thapar 1979: 138). At its height, in the mature phase between 2500–2000 BCE, it stretched for thousands of miles, with several cities—Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Lothal, Dholavira—almost all laid out in impressive patterns, with citadels and tanks, drains and paved streets. There was a uniformity over this vast expanse, indicating an integrated society, but since relatively few weapons have been discovered—particularly in contrast to the nearly contemporaneous societies of Mesopotamia and Egypt—it can be assumed to be quite peaceful. Some archaeologists have argued that its integrating force must thus have been religious rather than political; but this is a relatively meaningless claim since all societies have been integrated by some kind of religion. Some scholars, on basis of the associations of agricultural societies with matriarchy and pastoral societies with patriarchy, have seen the Indus civilisation as characterised by a matrilineal, goddess-oriented culture in contrast to the Vedic peoples. The excavations of the cities indicate well-planned structures, including drainage systems, and a minimal class society, with smaller shelters contrasting with relatively larger ones. Trade with Mesopotamia and elsewhere, interaction with pastoral nomads of all types, must have lent the urban centers a cosmopolitan air and provided the basis for intellectual growth and religious–spiritual speculation. But, since the script has not yet been deciphered, much remains speculative (see Possehl 1979).

It is likely that the Indus civilisation declined before the entry of the Aryans, or 'Vedic peoples'. Quite possibly ecological devastation and burning of the forests for bricks deprived the cities of some of the basic resources of their economy; very likely its inhabitants moved southward and eastward, carrying the remnants of their culture throughout India. After them came waves of migrating peoples speaking Indo-European languages, who entered India about 2000 BCE. The first-groups were non-Rig Vedic Indic speakers. The Rig Vedic people themselves entered the subcontinent around 1400 BCE and the Rig Veda itself was being composed sometime between 1700 BCE and 900 BCE (Kochar 2000: 185–86, 222; see also Witzel 2000, who gives 1500–1000 BCE as the dates for the composition of the Rig Veda).

This migration was part of the very wide-ranging movement of peoples of the time occurring throughout the Eurasian continent. In contrast to earlier settlers and societies, they had major military advantages in the use of the horse, the bow and arrow, and the chariot, with the latter developed in the nearby Iranian plateau just before they entered India. Though they may not have been the major agents of destruction of the Indus civilisation, they appear to have been involved in wars and conflicts with both the remnants of that civilisation and other inhabitants of the subcontinent.[3] Slowly, after about 850 BCE, they moved eastward into the north India Gangetic plains.

The Vedic peoples were pastoral nomads, with an economy based largely on cattle-herding. They had an inclination for war-making and their spiritual life was based on sacrifice and magic. The Vedas themselves began as hymns to be chanted by priests at the sacrifice to win worldly gains ranging from victory in warfare to relief from disease to a woman's love. It has been described as an exuberant, this-worldly, 'life-affirming' religion; and so it was, but the life it affirmed was one of warfare and acquisition which also defined the goals sought in the sacrifice and were the subject of most of the hymns, though later these became interspersed with far-ranging and powerful philosophical speculation. The underlying world-view, based on *rta*, a principle that interlinked the universe was a magical one. While this collectivist magic and the sacrificial rites may have been appropriate for a nomadic, war-like pastoral people, they became increasingly unsuitable to the needs of the rising agriculture-based class society, which required both peace and commerce to develop. In Iran this '*deva*' religious tradition of the Indo-Europeans was contesed and overthrown by the rise of the universalistic religion preached by Zarathushtra. In India more complex developments took place.

Two very different cultures, the Indic and the Vedic, and a mix of ethnic and linguistic groups, came together in the period of social tumult and momentous transformation in north India. With

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[3] The issue remains controversial. There is a consensus among archaeologists now that the Aryans did not destroy the Indus civilisation; but the Rig Veda records clear conflict, stories about Indra's slaughter of Vrtra which seem evidence that the Aryans destroyed dams which may well have been crucial to that civilisation (*Rig Veda*, 1994: 142, 148–55). See Witzel 2000 for a refutation of the current Hindutva thesis that the Aryans actually originated in India.

the growth of an economic surplus, cities and kingdoms came increasing social strains, class divisions, and pressure on the older, more equalitarian tribal and lineage-based societies of the region. Two major political forms appeared by the time of Gotama: the stratified but still 'tribal' *gana-sanghas*, and an emerging monarchical kingdoms.

The *gana-sanghas*, one of which Gotama was born into, were oligarchies. While these have been called 'tribal republics' and they were in fact democratically and collectively governed, they were nevertheless incipient class societies themselves. Like the ancient Greek city states, they rested on the labour of a subservient class, the *dasa-kammakaras* or 'slaves and servants'—a category that included both paid and unpaid labour. Their ruling elites who governed by collective tradition were still defined by kinship, as members of a common lineage (Thapar 1984). Given time they may well have evolved beyond traditionalism into 'citizen'-based political societies like the Greek city-states. However, this did not happen. The very material facts of geography were the major obstruction: in the Gangetic plain, in contrast to the more isolated, mountainous terrain of Greece, the *gana-sanghas* were vulnerable and were finally overwhelmed by the rising monarchies.

The *gana-sanghas* are identified with the Khattiyas (Sanskrit *kshatriya*), who considered themselves the supreme example of 'Aryan' nobility. However, we cannot assume that these were lineal descendants of the Vedic warriors, or that the term 'Arya' or 'Ariya' had by the time a racial meaning. Tremendous amounts of intermarriage and mixing had taken place; there is evidence of this even in the Sanskrit epics such as the Mahabharata (where the Pandavas and Kauravas are actually descended not from Bharat-Shantanu but from the rishi son of a fisherwoman and captured indigenous brides!). The *gana-sanghas* may have evolved from tribal groups of indigenous background, from 'Dravidian' or 'Sino-Tibetan' as well as 'Indo-European' ethnic groups. There is a tradition of the Buddha being 'golden-skinned' that indicates a partial Sino-Tibetan origin for this clan which was located near the Himalayan foothills. One scholar argues that the related Licchavis were Kiratas or 'Indo-Mongoloids' (Sino-Tibetan) (Chatterji 1974: 40).

The *gana-sanghas*, assaulted by the rising new social form, the monarchical kingdoms declined not too long after the time of the Buddha. These kingdoms were urban based, often headed by kings

who cared little for morality. In the Buddha's time the two major kingdoms saw cases of kings attaining their thrones through parricide, with Vidudabha killing his father Pasanedi in Kosala, and Ajatasattu (Sanskrit Ajatshatru) of Magadha killing Bimbisara; the story appears consistently in Buddhist literature. The kingdoms fought each other, and fought to undermine the *gana-sanghas* by out-and-out conquest, by treachery, and by fomenting dissension from within. Even though they did ultimately destroy the *gana-sanghas*, the Buddha borrowed the term and probably the model of a collective society for his Bhikku Sangha or order of monks came from these *gana-sanghas*. All this internal tumult was also linked to growing intrusions from the outside world, represented by the ability of the Persians to establish a satrapy in Sindh and by Alexander's failed invasion of India in 327–325 BCE. In the clash of the new kingdoms, it was ultimately Magadha—considered an impure land, a country of the *mleccha*, by the more orthodox Brahmans—that was to emerge successful, and from Magadha came the empire of Asoka, 100–150 years after the *mahaparinibbana* (Keay 2001: 78–80).

The emerging urban-based, commercial, prosperous, dynamic class society, with its mixture of tribes and peoples, of languages, Dravidian, Indo-European, Austro-Asiatic, Sino-Tibetan; with its ancient strains of the Indic and Vedic cultures and its tenuous links to the greater realm of Asian and European developments beyond the mountains, was thus characterised by intense turmoil and often great immorality. We see slavery and runaway slaves, robbers, warfare between clans, patricide in the new monarchies, sons not caring for parents, wicked women provoking their husbands, immoral individualism rampant. As the old bonds of tribal society dissolved and the old religions and ideological solutions seemed inadequate, people entered the new mobile society with no established moral–philosophical code. For this reason, it has been argued that when the Buddha in his famous 'fire sermon' described this a world in flames, it had its underlying emotional appeal in the sense of a world in transition (Upreti 1997: 112):

> *Monks, the All is aflame. What All is aflame? The eye is aflame. Forms are aflame. Consciousness at the eye is aflame. Contact at the eye is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the eye—experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain—that*

> *too is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs* (translation by Thanissaro Bhikku).

While the Buddha's discussion takes place on a psychological basis, the metaphor of a world in flames indeed captures what many scholars see as the special trauma of this era of change.

Thus it can be said that Buddhism arose, not as a response to Brahmanism, but rather as an all-embracing solution to the human predicament in a world in transformation.

The Samana Tradition: Striving for the Truth

There were two main contending cultural–religious currents of the first millennium BCE which were unique to India and which provided the context for the Buddha's teachings. These were based on the Brahman and the samana (in Sanskrit, *shramana*) traditions.

The word *samana* is translated in many ways, as 'ascetic', 'renouncer', 'recluse', 'hermit' and so forth. The root *samo* can mean either 'tranquility' or 'toil, fatigue' (Ambedkar 1992: 324). Today, in languages like Hindi and Marathi, 'shram' remains common for 'labour' and the 'shramik' is a worker. In the first millennium BCE, however, the samanas were those who toiled not to produce commodities or services for survival and social development, but to find the meaning of life. They separated themselves from the everyday world of social life, production, family involvement; as the Buddhists later put it, they chose 'the homeless life'. But this did not mean that they were necessarily ascetics or recluses. They went into the forests, individually or in groups, and lived either on what they could extract in the forests or on what people chose to give them.

Did this tradition of renunciation arise out of pessimism? Many have interpreted it in this way. Most Marxist interpretations, for example, see it as related to the traumas of a developing class society and they have viewed it as a kind of falling into history out of an earlier primordial communism. Exploitation and oppression, they argue, led people to flee into the forests. Yet the fact that so many of the samanas came from well-off families should suggest

otherwise. The samana tradition attested rather to an excess energy in society; it was the existence of a material surplus in the rising agricultural society that made it possible for many to exist without production or to live off extracted products of the forests, and their questioning was evidence of a dynamic society bursting the normal bounds of its cultural and social framework.[4]

There were various trends among the renouncers. According to the report of Megasthenes, who visited the court of Chandragupta Maurya in the 4th century BCE, there were 'Brachmanes' and 'Garmanes' (samanas), and

> As for the Garmanes he says that the most honourable of them are named Hylobii and that they live in forests, subsisting on leaves and wild fruit, clothed with the bark of trees, and abstaining from wine and the delight of live; and that they communicate with the kings, who through messengers inquire about the causes of things and through the Hylobii worship and supplicate the Divinity; and that after the Hylobii, the physicians are second in honour, and that they are, as it were, humanitarian philosophers, men who are of frugal habits but do not live out of doors, and subsist on rice and barley-groats, which are given to them by everyone of whom they beg or whom offer them hospitality; and that through sorcery they can cause people to have numerous offspring, and to have either male or female children; and that they cure diseases mostly through means of cereals and not through means of medicaments; and that among their medicaments their ointments and their poultices are most esteemed…and that both this class and the other practice such endurance, both in toils and in perseverance, that they stay in one posture all day without moving; and that there are also diviners and enchanters…and that women, as well as men, study philosophy with some of them, and that the women likewise abstain from the delights of love (Majumdar 1960: 145).

This shows the diversity of those following the samana trend. It would seem that those described as 'physicians…engaged in the study of the nature of man' were very likely Buddhists, who were

[4] While Uma Chakravarty argues that the samana–Brahmana groups lived off the surplus produced by the *das-kammakaras* ('slaves and workers') who were the basic labouring groups, in fact most only minimally lived off a socially produced surplus. Most were ascetics living on very little extractive processes. Later both Buddhists and Brahmans regularised through the Sangha or through priestly ritual a dependent relationship with society, which included living off the surplus.

not ascetics and according to the values of the 'renouncers' had less status (they were also identified, as we shall see later, with the Ayurvedic medical tradition). But most of those who lived in the forests were indeed ascetics, some practicing extreme austerities. There were also some aspects of Vedic tradition that encouraged austerities, and as Brahmanism developed, *tapascarya* usually meant practicing austerities in order to gain magical power (*shakti*). However a major source of the practice was indigenous and non-Vedic, and for the purpose, as the samanas used it, of gaining liberation from the round of rebirths (Bronkhorst 1998).

The notion of karma/rebirth link was the main framework that guided the philosophising and austerities of the samanas. In the tumultuous society of the first millennium BCE, with old tribal solidarities and certainties broken up, individuals were emerging with new questions: what happened to the personality after death? Was there any survival at all and what would its nature be? What was the point of it all? These questions were not of much concern to the Vedic peoples, who saw this worldly rewards as pre-eminent; there were gods and tentative heavens, but these were often themselves transient. At some point in the process of questioning and speculation, the notion of being born again took hold, and this began to be linked with the efficacy of action, or karma. Future rebirth, whether in heavens or hells or in particular positions on earth, began to be seen in 'causal' terms, a result of actions performed in one life.

The first millennium BCE saw in many societies the rise of consciousness about the individual. In India, the prevalence of the karma/rebirth ideational framework meant that this individual was conceived of as a being subjected to many births, going from reward to punishment, heavens to hells and round again, as a result of action in the causal chain. The problematic is the opposite of that posed in the Greco-Roman tradition, which saw the individual doomed to mortality, liable to death, the subject of tragedy. It also differs from the Semitic/Egyptian religions which saw the individual as related to a supreme Creator-God who presided over death, judgement and some form of immortality. In India, in contrast, the individual was seen, in the absence of a supreme God, as liable to endless rounds of birth and death, *jatimarana*. The actions and events of one life could be linked causally to those of another.

The dominance of the karma–rebirth framework in India was unique in the world, however it also shows an interesting characteristic of socio-religious ideologies: the answers given in religious-cosmological speculation to the problems of meaning very often generate further 'problems'. The concept of karma/rebirth was a solution to the problem of meaning, a solution that dispensed with the need for any notion of a creator God or a God intervening in history or beyond it to punish or reward human effort. 'Evil' (*papa*) and 'merit' (*punya*) had their own payment, however postponed or prolonged. This could of course be interpreted in varying ways, depending on what was called 'evil' (the Brahmanic version included infringement of caste rules; the samana traditions did not). But this displaced the problem of meaning to another level instead of fully solving it. The idea of a pleasant rebirth as a reward for merit, a bad one as punishment, solved the problem of experiential injustice by postulating some form of cosmic justice, providing in the process a ground for moral action in the world. But, the chain of karma/rebirth could lead to an endless cycle; births following births, cause and effect, actions and consequences, punishments and rewards over and over. The result is that the ultimate tragedy is not death but being condemned to an unimaginably long process in which not even heaven or pleasurable lives on earth could be secure, and tragedy and sorrow result from the endlessness of the process. The imagination of the Indians was now speculating in terms of aeons and ages; the cycles themselves, even the 'rewards' of heavens and pleasures, could be seen as oppressive. How would the cycle end? How did it begin? Could it end? What was the meaning of it all? How did the 'causal' chain of one birth to another work, and what were its moral characteristics? Could the whole round be transcended so that the individual soul could approach another beyond-the-beyond level of being?

Thus new questions were posed which affected both the groups that debated publicly: the wandering samanas, and the householder and secretive Brahmanic philosophers. Different trends emerged in response to them. The knowledge about these varied philosophies is limited; both Sanskrit literature and the Buddhist Pali literature describe them from their own point of view, and only minimally, in a spirit of refuting them. The Pali texts are more concrete in depicting dialogues and naming teachers who were undoubtedly actually existing at the time of Gotama. The most extensive text is

the *Samannaphala Sutta*, where the Magadha king Ajatasattu comes to the Buddha to ask about the 'fruits of the life of the samana'. In the process Buddha describes the unsatisfactory answers given by six other teachers of the time who had summarised their overall philosophies. This is a beginning point for an understanding of the samana trends.

Fatalists, Materialists and Dualists

Of the six teachers mentioned in the *Samannaphala Sutta,* two represent organised religious–philosophical groups that remained in existence for some time, the Ajivikas and the Jains. The others are not so easily identifiable.

The most pessimistic yet still powerful of all groups were the Ajivikas, who were rigorously rational fatalists. For them, the chains of causality which produced karma and led to rebirth were inexorable; no intervention of 'will' could affect them, the chain simply went on and on. Life (including what we see as good and evil, pain and pleasure) simply goes on until it comes to an end. The *Samannaphala Sutta* describes their leader Makkhali Gosala as telling King Ajatasattu (in Rhys Davids' translation):

> *There is, O king, no cause, either ultimate or remote, for the depravity of beings; they become depraved without reason and without cause. There is no cause, either proximate or remote, for the rectitude of beings; they become pure without reason and without cause. The attainment of any given condition, of any character, does not depend either on one's own acts, or on the acts of another, or on human effort. There is no such thing as power or energy, or human strength, or human vigor. All animals, all creatures, all beings, all souls are without force and power and energy of their own. They are bent this way and that by their fate, by the necessary conditions of the class to which they belong, by their individual nature; and it is according to their position in one or other of the six classes that they experience ease or pain....The ease and pain [of countless lives], measured out, as it were, with a measure, cannot be altered in the course of transmigration; there can be neither increase nor decrease thereof, neither excess or deficiency. Just as when a ball of string is cast forth it will spread out just as far, and no farther, then it can unwind, just so fools and wise alike, wandering in transmigration exactly for the allotted term, shall then, and only then, make an end of pain.*

This shows a denial of the idea of karma and it ultimately resulted in fatalism. Thus the Jains made two major divisions among the samanas, the *kriyavadis* and *akriyavadis*: those oriented to action with responsibility, those who denied both the efficacy of action and subjective responsibility. The Ajivikas were clearly among the latter, though the most extreme form is found in the reported teachings of another leader, Purana Kassapa, who simply denied cause and thus responsibility for actions:

> *To him who acts, O king, or causes another to act, to him who mutilates or causes another to mutilate, to him who punishes or causes another to punish, to him who causes grief or torment, to him who trembles or causes others to tremble, to him who kills a living creature, who takes what is not given, who breaks into houses, who commits dacoity, or robbery, or highway robbery, or adultery, or who speaks lies, to him thus acting there is no guilt. If with a discuss with an edge as sharp as a razor he should make all the living creatures on the earth one heap, one mass, of flesh, there would be no guilt hence resulting, no increase of guilt would ensure. Were he to go along the south bank of the Ganges striking and slaying, mutilating and having men mutilated, oppressing and having men oppressed, there would be no guilt thence resulting, no increase of guilt would ensue.*

These are awesome words, more colorful than those describing how no benefit accrues to the doing of good. Both to the Jains and the Buddhists this doctrine of *akriyawad* was extremely vicious, leading to moral nihilism and evil behaviour.

Yet we have a record of this philosophy of skepticism and fatalism only through its opponents, and there are inconsistencies in the stories. The Ajivikas were usually described as extreme ascetics, yet their most famous proponent, Makkhali Gosala, is said to have used song and dance for ritual purposes and was himself said to have been singing and dancing during his last delirium, replying to an obscure question by one of his followers with, ‘Play the vina, old fellow, play the vina’ (Chattopadhyaya 1981: 523). According to the Marxist philosopher Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, Gosala’s madness came about as a result of the fall of the tribal republics and the massacre of their members. Chattopadhyaya considers Gosala as the representative of a dying tribal equalitarianism, and believes that the inevitability of defeat of the tribal republics by a rising class society gave birth to pessimism. However, the period was

not one of primitive communism in any case, and the *gana-sanghas* in particular were not truly 'tribal' or 'equalitarian'. The Ajivikas, who denied the moral responsibility asserted by Buddhists and Jains, may indeed have modified their asceticism by including songs and ritual.

Two of the teachers, Ajita Kesakambali and Pakudha Kaccayana, appear to be materialists. Ajita denies the reality of both soul and afterlife:

> *There is no such thing, O king, as alms or sacrifice or offering. There is neither fruit nor result of good or evil deeds....there are in the world no recluses or Brahmans who have reached the highest point, who walk perfectly....A human being is built up of the four elements. When he dies the earthy in him returns and relapses to the earth, the fluid to the water, the heat to the fire, the windy to the air, and his faculties pass into space....*

Similarly, Pakudha Kaccayana appears to be a kind of atomist, postulating a 'soul' but one that neither affects nor is affected by the material world:

> *the following seven things, O king, are neither made nor commanded to be made, neither created nor caused to be created...they move not, neither do they vary, they trench not one upon another, nor avail aught as to ease or pain or both. And what are the seven? The four elements—earth, water, fire and air—and ease, and pain, and the soul as a seventh. So there is neither slayer nor cause of slaying, hearer or speaker, knower or explainer. When one with a sharp sword cleaves a head in twain, no one thereby deprives any one of life, a sword has only penetrated into the interval between seven elementary substances.*

According to the study of ancient Indian materialism by Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, the Tantra, Lokayata and early Sankhya were all different forms of materialism. However, their own original texts do not survive and none are clearly described in either early Buddhist or Brahmanic literature. Tantric traditions were ancient, and may well have had a base in ancient tribal collectivism and in rites connected with early agriculture and women's role in it. They identified the human body with the cosmos and emphasised male–female intercourse as the basis of life and the fertility of the soil and the earth itself (Chattopadhyaya 1981). But they were diffuse and did not acquire a written philosophical form.

The clearest form of early materialism was the 'Lokayata' tradition. '*Loka*' in both Pali and Sanskrit means 'the world', which has been extended to mean 'people' (its primary meaning in Indian languages today). Lokayatas would then be those who saw the existing empirical world as the total of everything. The founder of the Lokayata tradition is often said to have been Brhaspati, who is taken in Sanskrit literature as the legendary guru of the gods—only with the proviso that he taught the demons materialism in order to mislead them. This ambivalence indicates the existence of a famous historical sage whose main philosophy could not be made to fit what became Brahmanical orthodoxy but who was so far back in the dim historical past that he could be distorted and coopted (ibid.: 126–28).[5]

The Lokayatas were vigorously materialistic and atheistic. They used an empiricist logic, denying the role of inference (on the grounds that there can always be exceptions) and denying the existence of entities such as the 'soul' which could not be empirically sensed or proven. They thus defended a reductive materialism, saw the four elements (earth, water, fire and air) as the only original components of being, and consciousness as a product of the material structure of the body, which perishes with the body. Their most famous teacher was Charvak (they are also called Charvakas) and the existing story about him in the Mahabharata has him appearing in a council at the conclusion of the great war to protest the killing shows: this was indeed nonviolence, but it was the killing of kin that was the greatest sin (ibid.: 33–35). The Lokayata philosophy has been criticized as hedonism, but this is oppositional slander. The Lokayata tradition was described in a later Buddhist text (Rhys-Davids, Introduction to *Kutadanta Sutta*, *Digha Nikaya* I, 2000: 166) as linked to 'nature-lore' and was taken as a respectable part of Brahmanical learning. Probably the original materialism of the Lokayata helped to give birth to a natural science tradition.

The Sankhya system, supposedly founded by the sage Kapila,[6] is known classically as a dualist philosophy. It combines a material

[5] Interesting, Phule later cites in his *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak* (1891) a reported saying of Brhaspati that the Vedas were made by thugs; see Chapter 8.

[6] Chattopadhyaya also argues that the original form of the name may have been Kapilaa, that is the sage was a woman, and that she or he was from the northeast, a classic 'region of mother right and Tantrism' (Chattopadhyaya 1981: 380–82).

principle (often called *prakriti*, identified as female) representing energy which is active with the principle of consciousness or spirit or self (*purusha*, or male) taken as passive. In the 'classic' presentations of Sankhya (in a form acceptable to the Brahmanic tradition) a dualism between the empirical-sensual world and its knower, the *purusha*, was postulated and the goal was said to be the liberation of the *purusha* or spirit from the bonds of the world; (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2001; see also Natarajan 2001, for a discussion of the classic text, *Sankhyakarika*). Even the 'orthodoxy' of this was limited because, while the *purusha* represented an equivalent to the Brahmanic *atman*, they were still conceived of as multiple and not as one overriding spirit; and they were seen as unable to affect the world of matter. What saved the final orthodoxy of the system was a rather nominal acceptance of the authority of the Vedas and Brahmans.

However, Chattopadhyaya has argued that the original form of Sankhya was fully materialistic. The other term for *prakriti* or the material principle is *pradhan,* which means 'primary'. According to him, it was *prakriti* or matter that was primary and the system postulated a 'material first cause' which evolved according to its own *swabhava* or inherent characteristics (which he identifies as 'natural laws'). The *purushas* were originally multiple and not causally effective and were thus irrelevant. At points the evolution of the *prakriti* from *avyakta* to *vyakta* (latent and undifferentiated or 'unexpressed' to 'manifest' or 'expressed') could be seen as also giving birth to consciousness, or the *purushas*. In almost all the elaborations of the system, the three *gunas* (*satva, rajas* and *tamas*) were described as aspects of the original primordial matter, and a series of 24 classified elements were involved, including the four aspects of the world, as well as objects of the various senses. *Purusha* was added to these as the 25th, and later an oversoul or Supreme Being was added as the 26th element (Chattopadhyaya 1981: 376–400). The version of the system with 24 elements, then, would be materialistic. Thus it may well have been that the form of Sankhya dominant at the time of the Buddha was fully materialistic; it was centuries later that the Buddhist philosopher-writer Asvaghosh described it as a more classic Samkhya (*Asvaghosh* 1936: 166–79). Both Ajita Keshkambali and Pakudha Kaccayana deny a 'self' that is separate from the material world.

To take the purushas as an independently existing part of a dual system was itself a compromise with Vedanta spiritualism. But it was still not a sufficient compromise, and in the *Svetasvatara Upanisad* a creator god-supreme deity is postulated as a third principle over and above the dual *prakriti–purusha*:

> *Primal matter is perishable; the taker is the immortal, imperishable;*
> *One god has power over both perishable and self.*
> *Through meditation on him, through practice,*
> *Through his being (tattva) and more, in the end the whole artifice (maya) ceases (1,10).*

This translation by Valerie Roebuck shows a triple attack on Sankhya: primal matter, in contrast to the immortal self, is declared perishable; the plurality of selves is ignored; and a supreme being is declared superior to both.

Buddhism, Jainism, Lokayata and Sankhya were all evidently strong philosophical–religious traditions at the time of the writing of most of the Upanishads as well as the Brahmanical social literature (*Manusmriti*, *Arthashastra*) and the epics. Lokayata and Sankhya, though, had no long-surviving independent organisational existence and none of their own writings is available. The difficulty in understanding what Lokayata and Sankhya actually taught, or who sages like Brhaspati and Kapila actually were, can be seen if we imagine trying to understand Buddhism from the references in Sanskrit literature. Sankhya could be distorted and absorbed by turning it into dualism and stressing the spiritual *purusha;* and Lokayata could be distorted and cast into the dustbin of historical memory, Brhaspati could be taken as a historical progenitor of Brahmanism simply because he was distant enough in time and had left no independent records. This could not be done with Mahavir and the Buddha, who generated long lasting schools with exponents who preserved their literature.

The Jains are the only non-Buddhist religious trend among the samanas to survive today. They were extreme anti-fatalists, *kriyavadi* in their own terms, seeing the individual soul as primary and emphasising its moral responsibility. They were also atheists, denying the existence of an oversoul or supreme being. Like most others, they began with the notion of karma and some form of rebirth which went on and on; like the Buddhists they moralised

karma—it was violence, killing, evil actions which caused bad karma and rebirth; and they took as their goal liberation from the whole cycle, release from rebirth. In Jainism, in contrast to the psychological interpretation given by Buddhism, this process is viewed materialistically and literally. The Jains interpreted the cosmos in terms of a classic dualism: the two main principles were *jiva* (life, or soul) and *ajiva* (usually translated as matter). There was *jiva* in all things, from stones to animals to humans and gods; and every *jiva* was eternally separated from others. No 'transfer' of merit could occur; salvation or release form the cycle of birth had to be won, painfully, by each individual *jiva*. In this sense the Jains were firmly individualistic, as was the whole samana tradition to some degree or another. Soul and matter, or *jiva* and *ajiva,* were bound to each other, intermixed with each other; karma itself was a kind of very etherialised matter which clung to the soul. Freedom from karma and rebirth came through working out the bad karma; in part this was a matter of a process continuing from one birth to another, but it could be hastened through renunciation and austerities. (Sangve 1997: 18–57).

Thus the Jains were rigorously non-violent (to the point of wearing cloths across their mouths so they would not inadvertently kill any insects), celibate, and set themselves to endure often painful austerities. Ritual suicide, brought about by refusing to eat or drink, was the preferred ending of a pious Jain's life.

Much of this sounds similar to the dualism that spread later through the Middle East and then European society; dualistic themes similar to those in the Jain philosophy also appeared about the same time in Iran in the Zoroaster reformation, though there they emphasised a god (Ahura Mazda) and an evil supreme being, in contrast to the Jains, who denied the existence of any supreme god.

The Jain tradition has the credit of having one of the earliest historically attested sages of the period. Its most famous teacher in the Buddha's time, Mahavira, was thought by the Jains to be only the 24th of a series of *tirthankaras* ('ford-makers') going back to the Indus civilisation. The previous one, Parshanatha, is a recorded historical person dating probably around the end of the 9th century BCE—before Buddhism and the Upanishads. Parshanatha apparently organised both men and women followers into groups of ascetics (*munis* or *sadhus*, and *sadhvis*) and groups of lay followers (*shravakas*

and *shravikas*), building a solid organisational framework that some believe ensured the survival of the Jains up to today (Sangave 1997: 2; the later Jains were more male chauvinist). Jainism, though, mainly called its adherents away from the householder's life, in which violence of some sort was seen as inevitable, and the morality it preached for householders could be at most only a watered-down version of that for renouncers.

With all these contending trends of thought, the first millennium BCE was one of intensified debate, linked to the seeking and questioning of wandering philosophers, and when all kinds of theories and ideas were freely and energetically propounded. It was a period not only of economic growth, but also of intellectual dynamism. However, it was also the period when the Brahmanical philosophies, which went counter to all kinds of growth and dynamism, were formulated. Since these also provided the background for the Buddha's intervention, it is important to examine them.

The Self-creation of the Brahmans

Indian Brahmans as they have evolved over the centuries represent one of the most unique elites that any society has produced. They trace their origins back to Vedic times, where they were priests of the sacrifice, and it was as priests, intellectuals and possessors of the Vedas that they appear in the middle of first millennium BCE society. However, it would be a mistake to see the Brahmans, identified as a social group in the first millennium BCE, in 'essentialist' terms, as lineal descendents of Vedic priests, just as it is a mistake to take the Khattiyas as descendents of Vedic warriors or *rajanyas*. Both claimed purity of descent, but this was a self-serving mythologising.

Thapar has argued that Brahmans of non-Aryan origin were attested to in legends of sages such as Agasthya and Vasistha who are said to have been born from jars and of a Rig Vedic seer being described as *dasiputrah* or 'son of a slave' (Thapar 1984: 52). Some Pali texts, for example the *Ambattha Suttanta* (see Chapter 3) indicate that they may also have included illegitimate offspring of the Khattiyas. Even the Upanishads show that an occasional man of questionable birth could be accepted as a disciple and taken into the line of 'Brahmans'; for instance, in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, Satyakama Jabala's mother tells him, 'Darling, I do not know what

lineage you belong to. I got you in my youth, when I travelled about a great deal as a servant' (*Upanisads* 2000: 174).

Who were the Brahmans? Around the 2nd century CE, a Satavahana king of western India was described in an inscription as *ekakusas ekadhanudharas ekasuras ekabahmanas*, translated as 'a unique controller, an unrivaled bowman, a pre-eminent hero and a peerless Brahman' (Mirasi Part II: 45–47). But 'Brahman' (*bahman*) in this list could not have had a caste meaning, but rather seems to be used in an elegiac way; the same king married his son to a 'barbarian' Saka ruler and the Satavahanas had regular marriage connections with and basically derived from the indigenous Marathas (at that time semi-tribal). The Buddha and his followers consistently used the term 'Brahman' or 'Bahman'[7] to indicate nobility of character and learning, though the texts show awareness that this was a contested usage.

The term 'Brahman' was applied to those who claimed superior status on the basis of intellectual knowledge, ritual skills and to some extent moral attainments. They were taken as knowers of the Vedas. They were almost always non-noble, though the Jatakas give one example of a noble who is later described as a 'Brahman', Khattiyas and Brahmans were normally exclusive groups. Where Khattiyas oriented themselves to warfare and arms and were identified with the *gana-sanghas*, the Brahmans oriented themselves to the sacrifice, rituals and intellectual attainment, and were associated with the rising monarchies both as councillors and as priests. Unlike the samanas, they were householders, and their intellectual and ritual-related knowledge was overwhelmingly devoted to worldly concerns.

Ambedkar, in his days as a student at Columbia University, had written an early essay on 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development' which put forward a theory of caste as representing a 'closed class', closed by the imposition of endogamy, which began with an initial closure made by the Brahmans themselves (Ambedkar 1979: 15). This seems to have been the case; the Brahmans in postulating a varna social order, undertook a collective project of constructing themselves as a caste. It can be said that this process of closure was going on during the first millennium BCE, as

[7] We also don't know exactly which they used; see *Dhammapada* #388.

part of the process I have called the 'self-creation' or 'self-construction' of the Brahmans. The claim to superiority by virtue of birth was being made, and it was being brought into reality.

The process is seen in many Buddhist texts which depict a debate among Brahmans themselves about whether to identify themselves as a hereditarily-closed group. The *Vasetthasutta* of the *Sutta Nipata* begins with a debate between the young Brahmans Vasettha and Bharadvaj (both very esteemed clan names): 'Bharadvaj maintained that what made a brahman was pure descent on both sides right back for seven successive generations of forebearers…whereas Vasettha contended that it was virtue and moral conduct which made a brahman.' While the Pali texts may have tactical reasons for proclaiming the conversion of large numbers of Brahmans, the fact that many Brahmans are claimed to have sought out the Buddha (and others, in the Upanishadic stories, went to kings) to find answers to their questions, indicates that there was a fair degree of openness and dissension at the time among them. The Buddhists intervened in the debate by taking 'Brahman' to be a non-hereditary term and by insisting that it was 'virtue and moral conduct' not birth, that made a Brahman. However, this effort failed and eventually the debate was being won by those who claimed a hereditary and birth-given right of status. In the process, 'Brahmanism'—and not just the social group of Brahmans—came into being.

In the process of claiming birth-right and pure descent from sages, the Brahmans of course ignored mobility and 'irregularities' in their own family backgrounds; this is done by elites everywhere. Along with this, the 'moral conduct' seen as part of the Brahman's character was interpreted in Brahmanic literature, in contrast to that of Buddhism, in ritualistic as well as ethical terms, so that it included specific caste duties and the performance of rituals. Ethics itself included adherence to the caste system. Purity was also interpreted in materialistic terms; Brahmans remained as householders, not renouncers, but in doing so they gradually came to claim exemption from the pollutions of the material world with all its violence and death, and this meant that in the social order, other groups (Kshatriyas, Shudras and women) had to take over the 'responsibilities' of dealing with violence and the death-related aspects of material production. This in turn meant, as Dumont has stressed, that hierarchy was crucial to the system and the purity of

the Brahman at the top was matched by the impurity of the untouchable at the bottom (Dumont 1988).

At the same time, Brahmans laid the claim to Vedic Aryan origin, took the Vedas as their sacred texts, and continued the priestly ritualistic orientation. While claiming high status for themselves as a social group, they began to interpret the various other classes of society within a broad framework of varying social function. The beginning of the process was the proclamation of the divine creation of the varnas in the *Purushsukta*, considered a later interpolation in the Rig Veda:

> *When they divided Purusha, in how many different portions did they arrange him?...His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the rajanya (Kshatriya); from his two thighs the Vaishya; from his two feet the Sudra was born* (*Rig Veda* 10.90.11–12).

The next step was to utilise the karma/rebirth framework to interpret the birth of existing individuals into the various varnas on the basis of conduct. This can be seen in the *Chandogya Upanishad*: 'Those who are of delightful conduct in this world will quickly attain a delightful womb—a Brahman womb, a Ksatriya womb or a Vaisya womb. But those who here are of foul conduct will quickly attain a foul womb—a dog's womb, a pig's womb, or a Candala womb' (5.10.7). This formulation indicates it took some time before the four-varna scheme of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra became established as the desired formulation. The four-varna scheme was known during the Buddha's time; but it did not then define the social reality.

Later the four-varna scheme was elaborated by the writers of the *dharmashastras* (science of social law) beginning in the early centuries of the Common Era, of which the most famous is the *Manusmriti*. All people practicing occupations considered 'low', tribal groups who were being absorbed into the varna system, as well as people living in frontier areas not recognising Brahmanic authority, were classified as degraded or outcaste results of union of men and women of different varnas. The lowest were those who resulted from relationships 'against the grain' (*pratiloma*), that is, where the mother's varna was higher than the father's. The first eight of these mixed groups, those who were supposed to make a living by their 'innate activities which are reviled by the twice-born'

were the Ambastha (Vaishya mother, Brahman father) who worked as a 'medical healer'; the Nishada (Shudra mother, Brahman father) who was a 'hunter or killer of fish'; Ugra (Shudra mother, Kshatriya father) and the Ksattr (Kshatriya mother, Shudra father), who were both assigned to living by 'catching and killing animals living in holes' the Suta (Brahman mother, Kshatriya father) who was a 'charioteer or manager of horses'; the Magadha (Kshatriya mother, Vaishya father) who was a trader; the Vaideha (Brahman mother, Vaishya father) who was curiously said to make a living by 'doing things for women'; Ayogava (Vaishya mother, Shudra father; who lived by carpentry; and finally the Chandala (Brahman mother, Shudra father). The last, who was considered the lowest of all and became paradigmatic of untouchables for at least a millenium, had no special assigned occupation (*Manusmriti* 10: 8–26, 45). Besides these, the *Manusmriti,* gives another 17 castes born of mixtures of these (including the Sopaka, born of an Ugra mother and Ksattr father), and says that these degraded castes

> *should live near mounds, trees and cremation-grounds, in mountains and in groves, recognizable and make a living by their own innate activities. But the dwellings of the Candalas and the Sopakas should be outside the village; they must use discarded bowls, and dogs and donkeys should be their wealth. Their clothing should be the clothes of the dead, and their food should be in broken dishes; their ornaments should be made of black iron, and they should wander constantly* (ibid.: 50).

While this section of the *Manusmriti* is considered to be quite late (Sharma 1958: 191, gives it as about the fifth century CE), it is indicative of the broad attitude of the Brahmans towards these outcastes.

Other people born of the same Brahman or Kshatriya castes were classified as degraded castes because their father no longer fulfilled various vows and rituals. These included such *gana-sangha* groups as the Mallas and Licchavis, as well as Dravidas and Karans (important later as a caste of scribes and bureaucrats). Children of degraded Kshatriyas i.e., who 'failed to perform rituals or seek audience with priests' included again the Dravidas, Cholas, Persians, Chinese, Yavanas (Greeks), Sakas, Paundrakas, Kiratas and others (*Manusmriti* 10: 32–41). All of this was clearly not a description of social reality but an effort to rationalise it in terms of a newly developing varna classification. It is interesting that the *Suta* and the *Magadha*, who were bards in the early epic, were now

classified as degraded. Magadha can also be linked along with the Vaidehika to the two early kingdoms of Magadha and Videhi and by this time, apparently an increasingly aggressive Brahmanism saw the entire Mauryan empire as a realm of anti-Brahman religions and therefore degraded.

Most of the excluded or degraded groups seem to have represented tribal communities in the bordering areas. Many of them are listed in the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics; and differing lists and stories at different times show a declining status. For instance, the Nisadas were earlier viewed as independent and equal to 'Aryan' warrior groups but in later references are seen as despised and degraded (Brockington 1997: 101–105). The changing references to specific groups reveal not only something of their history, but also the growth of hierarchical conceptualisation in the Brahmanic tradition. It is a development in which the practice of agriculture, of most artisan occupations and originally important scientific occupations like medicine became degraded.

In the process of defining the varna system, the Brahmans instituted for themselves a tradition of rigorous training and discipline, which included studying and acquiring the knowledge of the Vedas and priestly rituals, abstention from many kinds of food and elaborate ritualised behaviour intended to maintain their own purity. This required the avoidance of contact with all the material and presumably degrading aspects of earthly life. Vegetarianism came to be a crucial part of this, in contrast to the Vedic love for the intoxicating drink *soma*, and beef. All this Brahmanic concern for 'purity–pollution'(*sovala-ovala*) became a crucial part of their identity; it rested on the labour and service of other sections of society, but aided in the creation of a unique mystique.

The Philosophy and Religion of Brahmanism

The necessity of transforming the old Vedic religion was clear by the middle of the first millennium BCE. Where sacrifice was appropriate to a pastoral society, unconcerned with productive use of the surplus and constantly on the move, it was inappropriate to an agricultural and urban society which needed its surplus for productive purposes (building and trading) as well as individual enjoyment. At the same

time, the consistent criticism of Buddhists, Jains and others against the slaughter of animals was having an impact. The response of 'Brahmanism' was not to reject the primacy of the Vedic sacrifice but to reinterpret it. Sacrifice became the ritualisation of the entire round of life, day by day and through it of all the major events in the life-history of the individual. Brahmanism, drawing on the Vedic religion and claiming the authority of its texts, but using them in radically different ways, ritualised the world.

This was accompanied by much philosophical and mystic speculation. However, in contrast to the samana tradition, this was not carried on openly as a matter of debate before nobles and commoners, in fields and forests, in city squares or audience halls. Rather, as the Upanishads show, a tradition of secret teaching, given from teacher to disciple as part of a firmly established social relationship of patronage and service, was emphasised. The Upanishads often end with a section showing the 'lines' by which the teaching came to be passed on—rather a parallel to the Biblical 'begats'!

Upanishadic speculation, ranging from perhaps 700 BCE to the first centuries of the Common Era (Roebuck, introduction to *Upanishads* 2000: xii–xvi), revolved to a large degree on hypothesising on the individual self or *atman* as the subject of all the round of rebirths in the framework of karma and rebirth. This involved a transformation of the felt, subjective self into a universal, primordial entity that was abstract and eternal. An early, famous example of this is seen in the teaching of the sage Yajnavalkya to his wife Maitreyi, described in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (4.5.6)

> *It is not for the love of a husband that a husband is dear: it is for the love of the self that a husband is dear. It is not for the love of a wife that a wife is dear: it is for the love of the self that a wife is dear. It is not for the love of children that children are dear: it is for the love of the self that children are dear…It is not for the love of the Vedas that the Vedas are dear: it is for the love of the self that the Vedas are dear…It is the self that must be seen, heard, thought of and meditated upon, Maitreyi; when the self has been seen, heard, thought of and meditated upon, all this is known.*

This self, the Atman, was then identified as formless, changeless, identical in all beings; it was the same as Brahman. 'Soul' is an inadequate translation for this. Upreti has analysed Buddhism as

helping in the creation of an individualism appropriate to the new commercial age, but he also sees the Upanishadic teachings as a major step forward in the development of such an individualism (Upreti 1997: 89–98). If it was, this was an abstracted individualism, one that left no truly moral or ethical way of relating one individual to another. In Yagnavalkya's teaching, there is no philosophical justification for loving the *other* as an empirical individual.

The individual 'I,' the subject of consciousness, was then said to be identical with the universal deity, 'that art thou', or Atman is Brahman. The play of the whole world, its seasons and changes, its sorrows and joys, was only that in the end, a play, an illusion of the eternal spirit. The notions of karma and rebirth were accepted as part of this; indeed they were used to provide the major rationale for the varna system. While there was a subtle denigration of the Vedas, it was never carried through to the point of out-and-out rejection. Similarly, while the Upanishads show that in fact many non-Brahmans played a role in this philosophical development, this was never openly admitted to challenge Brahman superiority. In the end, while the Upanishadic teachings themselves are sometimes said to have been marginal in the first millennium BC, their basic themes were later elaborated by thinkers like Shankaracharya and called 'Vedanta', to emphasise continuity with the Vedas themselves.

This eternal Brahman that was also held to be the individual 'I' could be identified with any of the Vedic gods or with popular local cult deities. The ability of the Brahmans to appropriate existing cults was one of the major factors behind their eventual historical success. Two major cults those of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, i.e, the Shaiva/Shakti or 'Pashupati' cult and the Bhagwat cult of Krishna that were taken up, 'colonised' or appropriated into a kind of Vedic framework, were in fact so different from one another that for two millennia afterwards they served to identify almost two separate religious traditions.

Vishnu, the second of the developed Brahmanic 'trinity' of gods, was said to have many *avatars* or incarnations, of whom the most appealing was Krishna. Many legends surrounded Krishna, a ruler of the Yadavas and an ally of one set of brothers in the epic *Mahabharata*. (Indeed, the society was full of stories, many of them shown in the Jataka legends, which also give early versions of both the Rama and Mahabharata stories). This charioteer of Arjuna became identified with the supreme deity in what is now the most famous of

Brahmanic religious books, the Bhagavad Gita which was inserted within the Mahabharata itself.

The Bhagavad Gita, intended for mass consumption and not just for the elite, was an all-around cosmological–philosophical justification, of the new *varnashrama dharma* society. The setting of the Gita is the agonising of Arjuna, the hero of the Pandavas, just before the battle of Kurukshetra is to take place: why should he take part in such a mass slaughter of kinsmen? In giving a reply, Krishna not only proclaims his own divinity and the unreality of slaughter, but also sets forth the ideal of caste and proclaims *swadharma*, the performance of one's own caste duty, as the supreme responsibility of the individual. 'Better one's own duty badly performed than that of another well done' is reiterated at the beginning and the end of the Gita. Self-control, dispassionate action, non-attachment were all proclaimed, but firmly within the framework of varna:

> *Of brahmans, ksatriyas and Vaisyas, and of Sudras, scorcher of the foe, the actions are distinguished*
> *according to the strands that spring from their innate nature.*
> *Calm, self-control, austerities, purity, patience and uprightness,*
> *theoretical and practical knowledge, and religious faith*
> *are the natural-born actions of brahmans.*
> *Heroism, majesty, firmness, skill, and not fleeing in battle also,*
> *are the natural-born actions of warriors.*
> *Agriculture, cattle-tending and commerce are the natural-born actions of Vaisyas;*
> *action that consists of service is likewise natural-born to a Sudra* (translation by Edgerton 1944: 87).

Here we can see how the 'essence' of the all-pervading brahman is fragmented, in the case of humanity, into varna–jati differentiation. Performance according to one's *swadharma*, for example, the duty of fighting in case the warrior, represents the performance of the Vedic sacrifice, the true *yagna*. Kurukshetra, the great slaughter-ground of the kshatriyas, is thus '*dharmakshetra*', the field of religious duty.

With the Gita, it becomes clear that the essentialist assertion of the immortality of the soul until it merges with the immanent all-in-all is one that seeks to maintain a static–cyclic view of the cosmos and of the place of humanity in it. Life, the social round, war, love-making, money-making, all are part of sacred duty, and there is no individual salvation apart from social responsibility. There is also

no need to modify that responsibility (whether that of the king and warrior, or the moneylender, or the farmer or slave) with ideas of universal individual rights and duties. Rather people were urged to go on maintaining their world, including the world of the four castes and the ritual life. Krishna's major promise in the Gita is that he takes shape as an avatar again and again to prevent chaos, and chaos is interpreted in the Brahmanic world-view to include not only growing crime and violence, but wives deserting husbands and the intermixture of the varnas. This was Brahmanism's primary 'solution' to the problem of social order posed by the emergence of a new class society—a caste-based solution, in which the actions of individuals could be as opportunistic as they wanted, but within the framework of the varna system.

The Shiva cult also became Brahmanised. Shiva was associated with the Vedic deity Rudra, and identified as the 'destroyer' in a trinity. This cult was also very ancient, and very often combined with that of the mother-goddess as a 'Shiva–Shakti' cult. One scholar of Buddhism, Richard Gombrich, argues that the famous legend of Angulimala, the vicious robber and murderer who was converted by the Buddha, points to this tradition. Among other indications, the bandit was supposed to have worn a string of human fingers around his neck, which Gombrich argues was similar to the necklace of skulls often identified with Shiva as destroyer (Gombrich 1997: 133–63). Whether or not this is true, it is quite certain that the cult existed at the time of the Buddha and others, and was absorbed by the Brahmanic tradition. As ascetics, the followers of Shiva differentiated themselves from the Buddhists, Jains and others by long matted hair and so were described as *jatilas* (those with matted locks), and ascetics of the two types were referred to together as *mundakajatilas* (shaven and matted-hair ones). The Brahmanic cults emphasised *tapascarya*, the effort to attain magical powers, and Shiva himself was said to be the supreme ascetic—and hence the most powerful. The notion of *Shakti*, seen as power, energy, creation, was identified with the worship of goddesses (Bhattacharya 1996).

Nevertheless, though Brahmanism admitted renunciation and asceticism, it did so only reluctantly. Brahmanism preferred the householder; the priest was to be a householder; and renunciation was accepted only as the final stage of society. Before this, for the elite, was to come the student stage—when a boy was socialised into the

proper knowledge, then the stage of householder, then gradual retirement into the forest. The result of this was the full-fledged description of the orthodox Brahmanical social order—the *varnashrama dharma* i.e., the religion of the four castes, and of the four-stage path of life. Renunciation for anyone who had not fulfilled his (or her) duty as a householder was rigorously discouraged.

Conclusion

The samana cults and the Brahmanic tradition emerged as two major contending and conflicting forces in the Indian society of the first millennium BCE. They clashed on several points. Organisationally, Brahmanism had its base in the householder Brahmanic elite, while the samanas had their base in the wandering hermits and mendicants drawn from various castes. Brahmanic philosophies were passed down through a guru–disciple tradition that was at times loose but was generally identified with caste hierarchy; a disciple from 'lower' castes would normally not be admitted. It was secretive. The samana groups, in contrast, were open to all and their philosophers engaged in often fierce open debates. Notably, they all denied the authority of Brahmans and the Vedas.

The story of Shambuk in the Ramayana illustrates the conflict. After Rama's return from the war with Ravana, a Shudra named Shambuk takes to asceticism in the kingdom of Ayodhya, and because of this 'sin' a Brahman boy in the kingdom dies. When his father makes an appeal, Rama enforces the law of varnashrama dharma by killing Shambuk. Here the Buddhist injunction to honour 'samanas and Brahmans' contrasts sharply with the way in which Brahmanic kings were adjured to persecute samanas of the 'wrong' caste and discriminate against '*pashanda*', a term that took on a harsh meaning by the time of the *Arthashastra* and a positively virulent one when it was used to condemn Buddhists and Muslims by the time of the Guptas in north India (O'Flaherty 1983).

Thus in a very important way Buddhism was identified with the samana tradition and as being against Brahmanism. In other senses, however, it arose as a philosophy and social–religious tradition that radically differentiated itself from but sought to absorb the best of both these forces. In Buddhist literature 'samanas and Brahmans' were both treated with respect (but 'Brahman' was consistently

defined in terms of action and not birth), and the words ‘samana’ and ‘Brahman’ are both used almost as equivalent to ‘arahat,’ as people who have achieved self-control and compassionate, righteous living. At the same time, asceticism, as well as priestly ritualism, was criticised; in this sense, the Bhikku Sangha was a form of organisation that saw itself, as an alternative both to the ascetic tradition and to the Brahmanic householders. Later Buddhists, for instance the Chinese traveller Hsuan Tsang classified Jains (the main surviving group of the samana tradition in his time) along with ‘pashupatis’ and worshippers of Brahmanic deities as ‘people of other religions’.[8]

The samana and Brahmanic traditions thus provided the background for the emergence of the Buddhist Dhamma as an independent philosophical–religious and social force.

[8] This is the term used at one point in Beal’s translation; otherwise he uses the word ‘heretic’. As Roebuck (p.c.) has pointed out, these translations often had the biases of Christian views of other religions.

2

The Dhamma: The Basic Teachings of Buddhism

The Ethicisation of Kamma

It was in the background of these samana and Brahmanic religious–philosophical trends that Gotama became the Buddha and formulated his Dhamma. As noted in the introductory chapter, there is a debate about whether there is a significant difference between the actual teachings or 'original Buddhism' and the classical Theravada Buddhism of the Pali texts. The argument for a difference ranges from Caroline Augusta Foley (C.A.F. Rhys Davids) who wants to reject the 'atheistic or anti-theistic presentation [of the Founder's teaching]…of degenerate Hinayana' (Introduction to *Digha Nikaya* II 1941: xii) to contemporary scholars like Burford and leaders like Ambedkar who interpreted Buddhism in psychological and this-worldly terms. The earliest texts indeed have no references to the karma/rebirth framework, that is to *jatimarana*; while the term *bhava* (which is sometimes translated in the same way and often is used to refer to 'future life') simply meant 'good fortune' (ibid.: x–xi).

In the Conclusion we shall return to this issue. However, it was the classical formulation of Theravada, embodied in the major Pali texts (Pali canon), that survived and was socially influential in India for over a millennium. This chapter therefore shall deal with the Theravada Buddhism of the discourses (or *suttas*)[1] and in this the karma/rebirth framework is a central aspect.

[1] The Pali canon is traditionally divided into three sets (the Tipitika), the discourses or Suttas, the rules for the Sangha or Vinaya, and the philosophical elaboration or Abhidhamma. The Suttas by and large are considered to be older.

However, a reading of these texts shows that the Buddha gave a radically different interpretation of this framework. In fact, we can take the specific Buddhist notion of 'kamma' as a central entry point to understanding something of the Dhamma. The simple meaning of *kamma* is action, which first millennium thinking linked with the notion of rebirth and the transmigration of souls through the inevitable links of action and re-action, cause and effect. Both samanas and Brahmans accepted this linkage of karma and rebirth. The Brahmans extended karma from the sacrifice to the necessary rituals and rites of daily life, defined in terms of one's place in the varna system. Of the samanas, some, like the Ajivikas, denied the efficacy of human action in affecting this *kamma*; others like the Jains stressed it, but all worked within the same framework. Even the materialists could put forward no convincing alternative. The Buddha also began from this framework but so radically reinterpreted it, using *kamma* in a way totally different from either the Brahmans or the samanas, that we can almost say that the framework itself was shattered.

In a sutta in the *Anguttaraya Nikaya*, the Buddha says, 'The kamma done, caused by or arising out of one of these (non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion), is skilful, not blameworthy, and brings happiness; it is helpful to the destruction of kamma, not to the arising of kamma' (3: 108). Here the term *kamma* seems to be used in two ways. In the first use *kamma* means 'action'; in the second it is used in the sense of the results of action (usually in future lives through the karma-rebirth link)—but then the Buddha notes that some kinds of action are innocent of the clinging *kamma* that produces rebirth. What actions are these? Those actions which are not done by or caused by or arising out of greed, hatred and delusion. The significance of action, then, depends on the subjective orientation of the actor.

This shows the ethicisation of *kamma* and the psychological orientation of the Buddha. In contrast to the Brahmans, the Buddha like other samanas stressed that it was actions of violence and nonviolence, against any sentient beings, which affected human destiny. Sacrifice and ritual meant nothing in this respect; and in discourse after discourse we see how the Buddha, in response to Brahmans and to those affected by Brahmanic teachings, advises the questioner to substitute righteous or loving actions for the sacrifices. Against most of the samanas, and in particular the ascetic samana

sects, the psychological intention behind on act is stressed as making *kamma* real and efficacious. The Buddha firmly rejected asceticism, meaning the absolutist position that any commission of 'violence'—connected actions leads to *a negative* result.

This is exemplified in his attitude towards meat-eating. In the *Vinaya* it is said that bhikkus could eat meat of an animal if they did not know it was killed for them; given the prevalence of meat-eating at the time and the general rule that a bhikku was supposed to eat whatever was put in his bowl, this is perhaps natural. But the teaching is made explicit. In the *Amagandha Sutta* (carrion discourse) of the *Sutta Nipata*, Kassapa, a former Buddha, is accused of eating 'delectable meals made from the flesh of birds', though he claims to touch no carrion. In reply he says that it is not meat that is carrion, but rather it is killing, maiming, theft, lies, lust, passion, pursuit of pleasure, anger, conceit, envy, all the wicked actions and emotions of men that is carrion. And he concludes,

Control thy senses, rule thy powers, hold to truth, be kind.
The saint who leaves all ties and vanquishes all sorrow
is stained by naught he sees or hears' (Sutta Nipata #250).

A Jataka story, directed specifically against Jain teachings, makes this clear. Mahavira (Nigantha Nathaputta) is born as a wealthy devotee who feeds meat to the Boddhisattva as an ascetic and then accuses him of sinning. The Boddhisattva replies 'The wicked may for gift slay wife or son, yet if the holy eat, no sin is done' (# 246[2]). The one who kills, not the one who (unknowingly) eats, is guilty. All of the references to Jains in the Pali canon, in fact, make the same point. One Jataka even seems to argue that the 'noble' can even drink strong liquor without being affected (#183).

It is control of passions, self-discipline, the removal of lust and desire, that is the dominant theme in all the early recorded teachings. Even in the midst of worldly luxury, it is said that a person can attain such self-control:

Anyone who, though adorned in fine clothes, is tranquil,
who is peaceful, disciplined, self-controlled, virtuous,

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[2] Here and elsewhere in this text the numbers in brackets refer to the Jataka numbers as given in *Jatakas*, 1985.

> *who renounces violence towards all beings,*
> *such a person is a Brahman, a samana, a bhikku (Dhammapada, #142),*

In this way, the Buddha interpreted *kamma* not in terms of the chain of actions leading to rebirth itself, but in terms of the immediate, psychological, subjective actor in the immediate present. This focus on the concrete acting individual, and especially on the intention of his action, was a unique contribution of Buddhist thinking.

On the basis of these considerations we can turn to the understanding of the 'four noble truths' which troubled Ambedkar so much and yet are considered to be a fundamental teaching of Buddhism (see also Anderson 1999: 55–84). The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the 'turning of the wheel of the Dhamma', is the story of what the Buddha taught in his very first sermon after the Enlightenment. Its begins with a reference to the avoidance of the two extremes, of worldly yielding to the passions and sensuality, on one hand, and extreme and painful self-mortification on the other. This is the Middle Way, defined as 'right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness and right contemplation.'

Following this is the discussion on the four truths. These are that sorrow (*dukkha*) exists, that there is an origin of sorrow, an ending to sorrow, and a path to the ending of sorrow. Elaborating on these in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (6–7), the Buddha says, regarding the truth of the origin of sorrow,

> *Verily it is that thirst (or craving), causing the renewal of existence, accompanied by sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now here, now there—that is to say the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for a future life, or the craving for success in this present life.*

And this linkage of thirst/craving (*tanha*) with sorrow is simply repeated in the third truth, 'Verily it is the destruction, in which no passion remains, of this very thirst; the laying aside of, the getting rid of, the being free from, the harbouring no longer of this thirst.'

Tanha is a crucial category in Buddhist thinking, and it points to a psychological state and not an intellectual one. This is crucially different from the later elaboration of the chain of causality (the *pattica samuppada* with its classical 12 stages) where the origin of suffering lies in ignorance, *avijja*, while the end of suffering starts

with faith. Instead, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* and the other most frequently used teaching of the four truths begins, rather, with craving (*tanha*). It is the overcoming of this that is the way to the end of suffering. What is required for liberation, then, is not renunciation of the world itself, but of desire for the world; what must be done is to gain control over the passions. As beautifully stated in the great collection of Tamil moralistic poems, the *Kural,* written under Buddhist influence,

The wise declare, through all the days, to every living thing
That ceaseless round of birth from seed of strong desire doth spring.
If desire you feel, freedom from changing birth require!
'Twill come, if you desire to 'scape set free from all desire...
Men freed from bonds of strong desire are free;
None other share such perfect liberty....
Affliction is not known where no desires abide;
Where these are, endless rises sorrow's tide.
When dies away desire, that woe of woes,
Even here the soul unceasing rapture knows (Kural, #37).

If craving is the root of sorrow, then the end of sorrow requires the destruction of the craving. This is primarily morality: it is a morality of self-control, not simply of avoiding action, but of controlling and ending the passions involved in action. Again, as a beautiful verse in the *Dhammapada* puts it,

There is no fire like passion,
no chains like guilt
no snare like infatuation,
no torrent like craving (#251).

Renunciation, then, means not so much the renunciation of luxury, worldly goods and power as the renunciation of passion, of craving; it leads to a compassion for all beings, and a realisation of the emptiness of worldly pleasures. Again and again, the ideal person, a bhikku, an arahat, a Buddha, is depicted as calm, self-controlled, dispassionate, but at the same time filled with compassion and love. *Metta*, love for those who are equal and *karuna*, compassion for those more deprived, are the great Buddhist values. Love and righteousness are more important to the Buddhist than simple adherence to rules and rituals. This is in major contrast both to the ritualistic, caste-bound pseudo-morality of the Brahmans,

and to the literalistic, non-psychological, materialistic morality of the Jains.

So, when the Buddha is accused by Mahavir, through his disciple Siha, of teaching 'non-action', he replies,

> *I teach…the non-doing of such actions as are unrighteous, either by deed, or by word, or by thought; I teach the not bringing about of the manifold conditions (of heart) which are evil and not good….I teach…the doing of such actions as are righteous…I proclaim…the annihilation of lust, of ill-will, of delusion; I proclaim the annihilation of the manifold conditions (of heart) which are evil and not good….I teach…that all the conditions (of heart) which are evil and not good, unrighteous actions by deed, by word, and by thought must be burned away. He who has freed himself, Siha, from all conditions (of heart) which are evil and not good, which ought to be burned away, who has rooted them out, and has done away with them as a palm tree is rooted out, so that they are destroyed and cannot grow up again – such a person do I call accomplished in Tapas* (*Kullavagga* VI, 31, 1–9).

This is an ethicisation and a psychological interpretation. Righteousness and conquest of passion are the goals towards which the samana strives. This gives support to Ambedkar's interpretation, where he gives the words of the five former companions on hearing the Buddha's first sermon, that 'the goal of happiness can be attained by man in this life and on this earth by righteousness born out of his own efforts.'

The Self and the Cosmos

Ethical action implies a subject of action, a self capable of agency in a world of similar selves. 'Agency' implies some degree of freedom of action. Human action may be conditioned by psychological and material factors, but not in a fully deterministic way that leaves no scope for 'free will'. The concrete, human self is the focus of the Buddha's teaching; and most of the life of a samana, including rules for daily living as well as prescriptions about meditation and control of mind, is directed to the 'training' or cultivation of a self that can act righteously with dispassion and compassion.

Other teachings of the time tended to identify the self and the cosmos. Upanishadic idealism searched for such things as the real 'being' behind the individual self, the 'meaning' of the link between

sacrifice and the world order, the ultimate being of the universe and in the end identified all of these as one. Jainism, though seeing selves as multiple and separate from the universe of matter, identified the 'self' with an eternally existing *jiva* that had to be freed from matter and thus from karma. Samkhya dualism, with its consciousness–matter dichotomy, symbolised as *purusha* and *prakriti*, tended in a different way to derive the concrete self from the evolving material world. Both materialism and idealism are in this sense deterministic and objectivistic, seeing the subjective individual self as derived from a larger being, whether spiritual or material.

The Buddha's teaching was different. He radically refused to express his thoughts about the origin of the world, embodied most famously in the metaphor of the arrow: if a man is wounded, we don't bother asking about the origin of the arrow, who made it, etc.; our goal is to heal the wound. This assumed a radical dichotomy between the human self and the universe beyond. It was not seen as necessary to 'know' any ultimate 'reality' in order to understand suffering and finding a way for liberating the human self. The focus is on this human self, on psychology in the broadest sense. This meant that while humans were seen as part of and coming out of the world of nature, the emergence of consciousness and will was something unique.

As is well known, the 'three characteristics' of the world described by the Buddha are *anicca* (impermanence), *anatta* (non-soul), and *dukkha* (sorrow). The world is transitory; there are no essences in it and in particular no essential 'soul' within the existing individual that is a subject of rebirth; and because it is transitory it is full of sorrow in the sense that even joys turn into sorrow as they vanish. These characteristics can be taken as the opposite of the Upanishadic '*sat-chit-ananda*'. The Buddha clearly denied the central theme of Upanishadic theory, the *atman*, and described the individual personality as an aggregate of five *khanda*s: physical form, feelings, apperceptions, volition and consciousness. But the aggregate was not meaningless. The discourses show a very lively sense of the concrete individual—and of the fact that that individual existed as a social being, in relation to others.

The Buddha's comment on the 'self' in every person can be seen in a story that is a parallel to the Upanishadic story quoted earlier of Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi. In the Buddhist story the king Pasenadi asks his queen, 'To you is there anyone dearer than self?'

'Great king, to me there is no one dearer than self. How about you?' 'To me, too, Mallika, there is no one dearer than self'. Then the whole conversation is reported to the Buddha and he comments, 'Having traversed all directions in thought, he nowhere found one dearer than self. In this way, for others too the separate self is dear. Therefore one who loves self should not harm others'. (*Samyutta Nikaya* III, 1, 8; see Gombrich 1997: 62–63 for the best recent translation). Several verses from the *Dhammapada* make the same point: 'All men tremble at punishment; all men love life. Likening others to oneself, one should neither slay nor cause to slay' (#130).

This is strikingly different from the Upanisadic teaching. In the Brahmanical version, the 'self' as a concrete person or individual is ignored, and even denigrated; there is a leap immediately to the abstract, universal *atman*. It is for this reason that 'love' is said to exist; as love for the universal, not as love for a concrete other. This very abstractness makes it possible to go on viewing the concrete individual in differentiated form as man, woman, Brahman or Shudra, and to treat him or her differentially according to the rules of *varnashrama dharma*. There is no ethical implication regarding treatment of the 'other' in the Brahmanic teaching or concept of the self. In contrast, for Buddhism of course there is no universal, essential, abstract *atman*; though the individual is an aggregate of the five *khanda*s, it is this very individual which is the subject and object of ethical action. It is this individual who begins by acting in self-love, but out of this concrete beginning comes the concern for others and the ethical imperative.

This focus on the psychological and the concrete also differentiates the Buddha's teachings from what we know of the various forms of materialist philosophy. While these philosophies postulated a material 'first cause', they also had the effect of taking the actions of the concrete individual as determined and derivative. Perhaps this is why the *Samannaphala Sutta* accounts of their teachings show them as fatalistic.[3]

The Buddha rejects any 'first cause', whether idealistic or materialistic. This is elaborated in the *Mulapariyaya Sutta*, which is a sutta directed to questioners from the Samkhya school and which is a rejection of any first cause or 'root principle'. The Buddha not

[3] I am indebted to Valerie Roebuck for her help in clarifying this.

only rejects a material (Samkhya) or idealistic (Vedantic) first cause; he rejects even taking *nibbana* as a first principle. As its translator Thanissaro Bhikku notes,

> *In the pattern of Samkhya thought, Unbinding (nibbana) would thus be the ultimate 'root' or ground of being immanent in all things and out of which they all emanate. However, instead of following this pattern of thinking, the Buddha attacks it at its very root: the notion of a principle in the abstract, the 'in' (immanence) and 'out' (emanation) superimposed on experience* (see www.sacred-texts.com/bud/maj/).

What is substituted for the notion of a ground of being or first cause as a method of analysis is a series of causal chains, of 'dependent co-origination'—the famous *paticca samuppada* (in Sanskrit *pratitya samutpada*), in which one thing arises out of something else, in a regular but non-deterministic process.

At one level the *paticca samuppada* is a simple statement of causal relationships. It is in the form, 'If this arises, that also arises; if this ceases, that ceases'. This implies a regularity of relationship that is more equivalent to the empirical regularities scientists search for than the postulated 'first cause' of the materialists. However, the fully developed form of this chain of causality, which is taken as sancrosanct by most of later Buddhism, is indeed metaphysical and idealistic. It begins with ignorance (*avijja*) which gives rise to the aggregates (*sankhara*) which in turn give rise to consciousness (*vinnana*), to name and form (or 'mind and body'; *nama-rupa*), to the six senses (*salayakam*), to contact (*phassa*) to sensation (*vedana*), to thirst or craving (*tanha*), to grasping (*upadana*), to becoming (*bhava*) to birth (*jati)* to old age and death (*jaramarana*). If 'ignorance' is the beginning point, then it is implied that the whole process leading up to the world of sorrow and death is based on an illusion.

Yet some of the most important statements of the causal chain underlying sorrow take different forms. The is not only true of the *Dhammcakkappavattana Sutta* cited earlier, but also in the long sutta on causation in the *Digha Nikaya*, the *Mahanidana Suttanta*. The beginning of the chain is actually a circle, with cognition (*vinnana*) going to name-and-form (*nama-rupa*) and back again; from there it goes on to contact, to sensation (*vedana*), to craving (*tanha*), to grasping (*upadana*), to becoming, to birth, to old age and death. In other words, the chain begins from the actual

material–psychological existence of the individual immersed in the world and not from the illusion which the individual has of being immersed in the world. It is clearly stated that *nama-rupa* causes *vinnana* and in turn *vinanna* causes *nama-rupa,* a kind of dialectical unity of the mental and material world. And this is repeated in an earlier sutta giving the same statement regarding the enlightenment of Vipassi, the 'first Buddha', and is presented in Asvaghosh's *Buddhacarita,* an important poetic biography of the Buddha written around the 1st century: 'consciousness and name-and-form are causes of one another' (*Asvaghosh* 1936: 212).

Further, the explanation of the cause–effect relationship follows a formula that actually shows indeterminacy. In Rhys David's translation of the *Mahanidana Suttanta* (Great Discourse on Causation),

> *I have said that grasping is the cause of becoming. Now in what way that is so, Ananda, is to be understood after this manner. Were there no grasping of any sort or kind whatever of anyone at anything – that is to say, no grasping at things of sense, no grasping through speculative opinions, no grasping after mere rule and ritual, no grasping through theories of the soul – then, then there being no grasping whatever, would there, owing to this cessation of grasping, be any appearance of becoming?' 'There would not, lord'. 'Wherefore, Ananda, just that is the ground, the basis, the genesis, the cause of becoming, to wit, grasping*' (6).

In this statement of the relationship between two phenomena, one is necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) for the other. This is not a statement asserting absolute determination. It is in many ways appropriate for understanding psychological causation in which the very ground of morality requires that there should be some freedom of choice, some ability in humans to overcome their conditioning and act in an ethical way. There is conditioning, but it can be overcome; that is, the 'chain' can be broken, destroyed or transcended.

The sutta also contains an extended discussion of the development of the basic personality, name-and-form (*nama-rupa*), along with cognition or consciousness (*vinnana*), and again name-and-form are declared to be the cause of cognition, and cognition is declared to be the cause of name-and-form. Rather than looking on this as a logical circle, what is being stressed here is the unity of physical form and consciousness or cognition:

> *In so far only, Ananda, can one be born, or grow old, or die, or dissolve, or reappear, in so far only is there any process of verbal expression, in so far only is there any process of explanation, in so far only is there any process of manifestation, in so far only is there any sphere of knowledge, in so far only do we go round the round of life up to our appearance amid the conditions of this world – in so far as this is, to wit, name-and-form together with cognition* (22).

This is a statement about the dialectical unity of material body and consciousness; matter and spirit. It is after this that the discourse turns to the notion of 'soul', but the stress is on refraining from making declarations about it. In the end, as far as rebirth is concerned, there is a rejection of 'verbal expressions': to say that an Arahat does or does not go on after death, is declared to be meaningless.

Thus the thrust of the basic teachings is psychological and empirical, not metaphysical (whether idealistic or materialistic). Reading the Buddhist 'scriptures' in contrast to the Upanishads, to the Dharmashastras, to the Bible or the Koran is striking: there is no supreme god,[4] no ritualism, no magic. There are many stories, though a few legends and only a few miracles (though they are there). There are few things that are put forth as commands, and little that is seen as 'coming from on high'. The tone is calm and discursive; ideas are presented; they are urged, but the basis is rational; it is calmness, the truth, reasonability that convinces everyone. What is said is geared to the listener; the Buddha talked in the terms and within the assumptions of Brahmans and householders, whether they were searching for simple answers to simple problems or asking more complicated cosmological questions. He rejected the idea of providing a metaphysical framework for explaining the universe and good and evil—but he was ready to answer all questions—in his own way.

The classical Theravada presentation of the Dhamma assumes that the end of rebirth is the goal, but there are contradictory passages in the Pali canon where the stress is not on this so much as on ending rebirth as on the need to do away with the *desire* for rebirth. The main focus is on ethics. Whereas the Brahmans ritualised the earlier religious teachings, the Buddha took the main ideological

[4] Though the paraphenalia of devas, asuras, rakshasas etc. are accepted, they are all seen as beings caught in samsara, not so different from humans.

framework of his time, the karma–rebirth frame, and ethicised it. In calling this ethicisation 'a turning point in the history of civilisation', Gombrich (1997: 51) has pointed to the unique contribution of Buddhism.

The Sangha and Society

In the long and important *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, there is a detailed account of the many actions and words of the Buddha in the last three months leading up to his death. He addressed the householders (apparently mostly farmers) of Pataligama; he responded to the question of Vassakara, prime minister of Magadha, about the strength of the Vajjian oligarchical confederation, describing in the process their collective decision-making which in some ways served as a model for the Sangha itself. He accepted the dinner invitation of the courtesan Ambapalli in spite of the competitive claims of the Licchavis; he had many discussions with Anand; and gave many final discourses to sets of bhikkus; and finally he ate the fatal meal given by the artisan, Cunda.

This itself illustrates the range of people and the range of concerns the Buddha dealt with. In the course the three months, after the most momentous conversation with Ananda, when the evil being Mara tries to bring about his death, the Buddha says,

> *I shall not die, O Evil One! Until the brethren and sisters of the order, and until the lay-disciples of either sex shall have become true hearers, wise and well-trained, ready and learned, versed in the Scriptures, fulfilling all the greater and lesser duties, correct in life, walking according to the precepts – until they, having thus themselves learned the doctrine, shall be able to tell others of it, preach it, make it known, establish it, open it, minutely explain it and make it clear – until they, when others start vain doctrine, shall be able by the truth to vanquish and refute it, and so to spread the wonder-working truth abroad!* (II, 3).

This reiterates what the Buddha is supposed to have said at the beginnings of his teaching career, when the bhikkus are sent forth: 'Go ye now, O Bhikkus, and wander for the gain of many, for the welfare of many, out of compassion for the world….' (*Mahavagga*, I, 11, 1). Thus, the Dhamma is not simply for those who leave the life of the householder, but for all, for the lay disciples as well as

for the 'brothers and sisters of the order'. It is declared that the Dhamma is not for a small spiritual elite but for the people, in words that still resound in Indian vernacular languages today: *bahujan hitaya, bahujan sukhaya*. The approach was to be broad and the access universal. As another sutta puts it, 'just as the river Ganges slopes, slants and proceeds towards the ocean, so the congregation of the Gotama, the laity as well as the religious, slopes, slants and proceeds towards *nibbana*' (*Anguttara Nikaya* IV). The Dhamma was also not just a 'religious' teaching which outlined the way to Enlightenment for the seeking individual: it was in effect (if not in the intention of most of the historical forms of Buddhism) a prescription for the remodeling of society.

The society of the first millennium BCE as experienced by Gotama was dual; it consisted of 'householders', who lived in the world as they found it, and the 'homeless' samanas, who sought answers to the meaning of life. The world of householders was one of bondage to social responsibility and the inevitable responsibility for 'sorrow' that involved; the world of the samanas was free from these but at the same time was characterised by extreme turmoil and normlessness, anomie, and the conflict of 'views', i.e., esoteric philosophical wrangling with each leader proclaiming to be in possession of the truth. They represented, in other words, the 'extremes' which the middle path sought to avoid. In prescribing the middle path, the Buddha offered a reconstruction both for world of householders, kings, nobles and workers and for the life of the samanas, in the shape of the Bhikku Sangha.

What was taught by the Buddha to every individual or group varied according to the ability of the individual or group to comprehend. For instance, in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha teaches the Pataligama householders simply that 'rectitude' (righteousness) will have its worldly and otherworldly rewards (great wealth, good repute, ability to stand up in society, lack of anxiety at death, and a good rebirth), while the lack of rectitude will have the opposite *effect*. This was not an outline of the full path to liberation but a fairly simple summary of a social ethics outlined in terms of the kind of rewards that householders steeped in the demands of mundane life might consider important. While there were other teachings for householders which emphasise morality much more; teachings for Brahmans sometimes emphasised a goal of 'union with Brahma'. It appears that the Buddha left no

opportunity alone to guide people at all levels along the path of righteousness.

Just as the social world was in the main dual, the Buddha also had a dual approach for both the 'homeless' and the society of householders. Samanas through the institution of the Sangha were to moderate their asceticism and avoid acrimonious debates and philosophical wranglings; while householders were to carry on their activity within the framework of morality. The approach can be summarised in simple form by saying that while the social constitution of the Sangha was democratic and communistic, the prescription for society emphasised the ethicisation of the emerging market economy and monarchy, through righteous living for householders and the righteousness of a cakkavati or universal ruler.

The Sangha

It was believed that although those still in the householder's life could achieve understanding, Enlightenment was difficult for them. Among the 'fruits of the life of a samanna', the *Samannaphala Sutta* tells us, is that the householders' life is so full of care for survival in the world, for producing, meeting the needs of social status, that it rarely allows time for meditation and disciplining of passions. And so 'becoming homeless' was almost a pre requisite for full self-realisation. But, becoming homeless was not to mean aimless and solitary wandering. Wandering alone is also praised in some of the early suttas, especially in the 'rhinoceros' sutta of the *Sutta Nipata*, but primarily 'mutual aid and mutual discourse' were taken as important prerequisites of spiritual and moral growth. Thus the bhikkus collected themselves together, and at first wandered in groups, settling only during the rainy season when travel became nearly impossible, but then gradually taking on more and more permanent residence.

The collective life of the Sangha followed a structure that was adopted from and explicitly associated with the collective political life of the *gana-sanghas*. The *Mahaparinibbana Suttanta* tells that the Vajjians could block the efforts of Vassakara and the Magadha kingdom to destroy them only by maintaining their collective and democratic traditions. Following this is the Buddha's prescription for Sangha welfare, where he outlines seven conditions for the welfare

of the community in almost identical terms. These are meeting often and attending the formal meetings of the order; meeting and carrying out their duties in concord; not abrogating ways of doing things that had existed before; honouring the elders; not falling under influence of craving; delighting in the life of solitude; training their minds so that holy men come to meet them. Twenty-seven other conditions are then given, including not being connected with business; not indulging in idle talk; not stopping at some inferior goal on the path to nibbana; and dividing without partiality and sharing in common all that they receive (I, 6–11). At the beginning and for a long time there was no appointed 'head' of the local Sangha; there was never any 'vow of obedience' or 'vow of poverty'; the Sangha was democratic, communistic in its sharing of property, and extremely flexible. If any precedence was given to one bhikku over another, it was in terms of seniority, not in terms of birth or social status before entering the Sangha or in terms of any presumed 'merit' of knowledge.

It is important to note that the life of the Sangha did not involve asceticism. In this Buddhism departed from the samana tradition and was also opposed to Brahmanism. (Indeed, the 'middle path' rejected both the asceticism of normal samana life and worldly hedonism). This led to the Buddhists sometimes being called '*mundakagahapatis*' or shaven householders i.e., those who do not really practise asceticism. In a famous story, Devadatta, the in famous evil samana who seeks to destroy the Sangha and murder the Buddha himself, attempts to discredit the Sangha by making it seem unascetic. He puts forward 'five conditions', all aimed at making life more rigorous for the Bhikkus, but the Buddha refuses to accept them:

> *No, Devadatta. Whosoever wishes to do so, let him dwell in the woods; whosoever wishes to do so, let him dwell in the neighborhood of a village. Whosoever wishes to do so, let him beg for alms; whosoever wishes to do so, let him accept invitations from the laity. Whosoever wishes to do so, let him dress in rags; whosoever wishes to do so, let him receive gifts of robes from laymen. Sleeping under trees has been allowed by me, Devadatta, for eight months in the year; and the eating of fish that is pure in the three points – to wit, that the eater has not seen, or heard, or suspected that it has been caught for that purpose* (*Kullavagga* VII, 3, 15).

In fact, the Sangha provided for the individual bhikku in four very clearly defined ways that offered often better conditions than the precarious world around: food, shelter, clothing and medical care. These were important not only for bhikkus themselves but also in terms of the relation between bhikkus and householders. Food was regulated (and rules included those of courtesy in eating and concern so that all could have some share of it), and eating itself provided one of the most important linkages with the external society. The bhikkus not only took alms; they accepted invitations, and in so doing they had a major occasion for teaching the Dhamma.

The structure of the Sangha shows us the Buddha as an institution-builder, creating an association that provided for communism and welfare within a world that otherwise, worked on very different principles. It established a unique tradition of monasticism. It provided a way for bhikkus to renounce the world without fleeing from contact with it; to live close to cities and in communication with them but still apart from them. Regular contact with lay supporters came largely through donations of food, which supporters gave into the begging bowls as the bhikkus went on their rounds, or else was provided in feasts where all were invited to a fine meal. In return the bhikkus provided teaching, moral and practical instruction of life and psychological support in times of stress. Later the Sangha also took on other features: it provided educational facilities; it was the source out of which the famous universities of ancient India grew. It became an economic and financial institution; apparently loaning money. It became a social institution that was a refuge and a balance to the power of the state. In the process, 'corruption' of various types set in, and it departed from the original ideal—but the uniqueness of the Sangha as a monastic institution remained.

Ethics for the Householder

The eightfold path leading to the cessation of sorrow is classically divided into three major sections—rules for living, *sila*, or righteous conduct; meditation or *samadhi*; and intellectual insight or understanding, *panna*. Though the householder is considered in principle to be capable of all of these the major emphasis, nevertheless, in most of the teachings for them is on righteous conduct. Insight and

intellect tend to be difficult; finding time for practice of meditation is also hard; but the simple rules of righteous behaviour could for the most part be followed. Thus 'rectitude', as we have seen, was part of the simple teachings as given by the Buddha for the householders of Patilagama in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*.

In emphasising righteous conduct for householders and the role of monks in teaching it, Buddhism contrasted with both Brahmanic teachings, which emphasised sacrifice and observance of caste duty by householders, and Jainism, which utterly rejected the householder life and sought to avoid the contamination of monks by it. However, the 'righteous life' for householders could not, realistically, be organised in the way that the Sangha was. The Sangha in many respects sought to preserve the collective-democratic traditions of the *gana-sanghas* though this was not possible in a world of rising monarchies. Nor was collective property ownership a socially realistic prescription for economic life. Therefore, monarchy and the market were both supported—but an effort was made to humanise and moralise them. This section will deal with the prescriptions for economic life; the following with political life; and then we take up that aspect of the emerging society which the Buddha decisively rejected i.e., the social institution of caste. Patriarchy, which he only partially challenged, will be the subject of the final section.

The most famous teaching on economic life is the *Sigalovada Suttanta*, 'Admonitions to Sigala' from the *Digha Nikaya*. This is addressed to a young man of wealth and, without calling him away from the world, it seeks to wean him from both from a life of simple abandon and from the sacrifice and ritual-centered life fostered by Brahmanism. In place of these there is a concern for human relationships, and a life of solid work and service that might almost be described as 'bourgeois'. For ritual acts it substitutes the notion of fostering ideal human relationships, with parents, with teachers, with friends, with wives and with servants and employees (*dasa-kammakaras*). In Rhys David's translation,

> *In five ways does an Ariyan master minister to his servants and employees as the nadir:—by assigning them work according to their strength; by supplying them with food and wages; by tending them in sickness; by sharing with them unusual delicacies; by granting them leave at times [explained as constant relaxation so that they need not work all day, and special leave with extra food and adornment for*

> *festivals]. In these ways ministered to by their master, servants and employees love their master in five ways:—they rise before him, they lie down to rest after him; they are content with what is given to them; they do their work well; and they carry about his praise and good fame'* (III, 32).

This of course maintains a master–employer relationship, but it humanises and softens it. It also suggests, specially when it speaks about wages, that slavery is to be transcended, that the worker has rights.

The ethics of Buddhism for household life condones accumulation. In what is apparently an older poem in the sutta praising the accumulation of wealth it is said:

> *The wise and moral man shines like a fire on a hilltop,*
> *making money like the bee, who does not hurt the flower.*
> *Such a man makes his pile as an anthill, gradually.*
> *The man grown wealthy thus can help his family*
> *and firmly bind his friends to himself. He should divide*
> *His money in four parts; on one part he should live,*
> *with two expand his trade, and the fourth he should save*
> *against a rainy day.* (ibid.: 26)

This indicates an acquisitive society and, as one commentator points out, a phenomenal rate of reinvestment suggesting a rapidly growing economy (Basham 1958: 125n).

The ethics that is stressed here is one that is appropriate to a society that was open but was still influenced by class and gender. Relationships of subordination remain. Wife and husband, servants and master remain separate social categories. However, the admonitions begin in each case by describing how the superior should serve the subordinate, and the service of the subordinate is called upon in return for what the superior does for them. While this clearly involves the maintenance of the ideal patriarchal family and relationships of employment, mutuality is emphasised. The difference with the ideals of *varnashrama dharma* is striking. While the term *dasa-kammakara* in the Buddhist texts simply indicates people doing the work of service i.e., for pay or in bondage, for Manu and others servitude is a state of being. According to Manu, the Brahman may 'make a Shudra do the work of a slave, whether he is bought or not bought; for the Self-existent one created him to

be the slave of the priest. Even if he is set free by his master, a Shudra is not set free from slavery; for since that is innate in him, who can take it from him?'

Similarly, at the other end of the scale, the Brahman is a Brahman by birth and nature.

As presented in these discourses, the Buddhist ethics is what would be called by Marxists to be an ethics appropriate to capitalism, and not, obviously, to a classless society. (This is also the point of Upreti 1997). In the context of first millennium BCE society, however, it is quite remarkable. A welfare economy in which employees are to get a proper wage, holidays and a kind of medical insurance is not a small or mean ethics, and probably fares well historically when compared to the actual hierarchies and exploitation carried on in societies such as the former Soviet Union, which was the first society that aimed to abolish hierarchy altogether.

The Cakkavatti Emperor and the Non-violent 'Welfare State'

In regard to political life, the differences between Buddhism and Brahmanism are equally striking (see also Kancha Ilaiah's recent study of 'Buddha's Challenge to Brahmanism'; Ilaiah 2001). Numerous dialogues of the Buddha deal with the problems of rulership and of order and prosperity in society; many dialogues are also with rulers, most notably Ajatasattu and Bimbisara, rulers of Magadha, the rising monarchy of that time. The differences with the Brahmanism begin with accounts of the origin of kingship. The Brahmanical version emphasises the divine origin and even divinity of kings. As the beginning of the *Manusmriti* chapter on kingship puts it:

> *A ruler who has undergone his transformative Vedic ritual in accordance with the rules should protect this entire (realm) properly. For when this world was without a king and people ran about in all directions out of fear, the Lord emitted a king in order to guard this entire realm, taking lasting elements from Indra, the Wind, Yama, the Sun, Fire, Varuna, the Moon and the Lord of Wealth....Even a boy king should not be treated with disrespect, with the thought, 'He is just a human being'; for this is a great deity standing there in the form of a*

> *man.... For (the king's) sake, the Lord in ancient times emitted the Rod of Punishment, his own son, (the incarnation of) Justice, to be the protector of all living beings, made of the brilliant energy of ultimate reality.... The Rod is the king and the man, he is the inflictor and he is the chastiser, traditionally regarded as the guarantor for the duty of the four stags of life.... The whole world is mastered by punishment, for an unpolluted man is hard to find. Through fear of punishment, everything that moves allows itself to be used.... The king was created as the protector of the classes and the stages of life, that are appoint each to its own particular duty, in proper order* (7, 1–35).

These are selections from the first 35 stanzas of the chapter; in them the emphasis is on the divinity of the king and his *danda*, or rod of punishment. There is not a single word of welfare; the state is associated with 'legitimate violence' or punishment. And it is specifically the caste system and ideal stages of life which are to be protected and enforced upon the population. This is a major theme running through the later epics and shastras. Not only is Rama, the ideal king, depicted as killing Shambuk in order to protect the laws of varna; he is also shown as killing the *rakshasas* of the forests at the urging of the Brahman rishis. Kautilya, while considerably more liberal than Manu, still does not stress upon welfare as a responsibility of the king in the way the Buddhist texts do. The 17th century Maratha ruler Shivaji, who described himself in his own inscriptions as maintaining welfare, is instead constantly depicted in Hindu nationalist propaganda as '*gobrahman pratipalak*'. From the Brahmanical viewpoint, the 'protection of society' begins with the 'protection of cows and Brahmans'.

A Buddhist story of the origin of kingship is given in the *Aganna Suttanta* of the *Digha Nikaya*. The setting is a dispute about the status of Brahmans, with Brahmans once again calling the bhikkus 'shaveling friarfolk, menials, swarthy of skin, offspring of our kinsman's heels.' The Buddha denies the relevance of birth, arguing that good and evil can be done by people of all varnas, and then tells a story of the origin of Brahmans, with no gods at all in it. It depicts original humans, made up of mind, living on rapture, until some develop a taste for savoury earth and their self-luminescence fails. The result is the origin of night and day and the seasons, and the development of solid bodies. From this, some begin to feel they are more comely than others, and with this pride the savoury earth they have fed on vanishes. They begin to eat growths from the soil,

first creepers, and then rice, and as their bodies grow more and more solid, they become differentiated into male and female; immorality develops. As evil and immoral customs grow, the rice ceases to replenish itself automatically, and people begin to divide the rice fields, setting up boundaries between them.

> *Now some being…of greedy disposition, watching over his own plot, stole another plot and made use of it. They took him and holding him fast, said: Truly, good being, thou has wrought evil in that…See, good being, that thou do not such a thing again! Ay, sirs, he replied. And a second time he did so. And yet a third. And again they took him and admonished him. Some smote him with the hand, some with clods, some with sticks. With such a beginning, Vasettha, did stealing appear, and censure and lying and punishment became known* (*Digha Nikaya* III, 1921: 87).

After this the people decide to choose a king to enforce justice and punishment. He is variously described as Mahasammata which means 'chosen by the whole people,' Khattiyya, or 'Lord of the Fields' and Raja, 'He who charms by the Dhamma.'

The story of the origin of the king is a story of the origin of the Khattiyas, who are considered by Buddhists to be supreme among the four sections. Following this the origin of the Brahmans is described, (they are described as being related to meditation and learning), with the comment that 'at that time they were looked upon as the lowest; now they are thought the best', followed by the Vessas (described as those who follow various or 'vessa' trades) and the Suddas, those who 'live by hunting and suchlike trifling pursuits'. It is however emphasised that all can be good or bad, all can become bhikkus. Not only does the tale have no gods; humans themselves are depicted as originally spirit-like, but gradually, in a process of cause-and-effect and not through some inherent 'essential' nature, falling into disorder and crime.

The differences between Buddhism and Brahmanism as given in the story about the origin of the state is only the beginning of differences. In Buddhism, the ideal king is described as a universal emperor or 'cakkavatti', a wheel-ruler. Both Buddhist and Jain traditions see their teachers as having the potentiality, at birth, of becoming either a Buddha (or *tirthankara*) or a cakkavatti king. However, whereas in Jain literature the gap between the samanas and the worldly life remains acute, so that the king is often shown

renouncing his throne, in the Buddhist literature the Boddhisattva is often shown as an ideal cakkavatti king ruling over a golden age. There is a parallelism between the world of the householders and the world leading to nirvana. The cakkavatti is conceived of as protecting dhamma, as holding power (he has a 'four-fold army') but he rules without requiring this use of force. The problem of order in society is recognised, and is the central responsibility of the king—but again, is to be primarily solved without force and punishment. As the *Kutadanata Sutta* has it,

> *Now there is one method to adopt to put a thorough end to this disorder. Whosoever there may be in the king's realm who devote themselves to keeping cattle and the farm, to them let his majesty the king give food and seed-corn. Whosoever there may be in the king's realm who devote themselves to trade, to them let his majesty the king give capital. Whoever there may be in the king's realm who devote themselves to government service, to them let his majesty the king give wages and food. Then those men, following each his own business, will no longer harass the realm; the king's revenue will go up; the country will be quiet and at peace; and the populace, pleased with one another and happy, dancing their children in their arms, will dwell with open doors* (*Digha Nikaya* I, 11).

This depicts a society without much servitude, one of traders, farmers and government employees. Except for the absence of factories, it has a very 'modern' ring to it.

The ideal Buddhist ruler is called upon to actively intervene to prevent impoverishment, to help the destitute. This is the theme of the *Cakkavatti Suttanta* of the *Digha Nikaya* in which poverty comes to exist in a kingdom because wealth has not been given to the destitute. The full story begins with an ideal king, who finds after many thousand years of rule that the celestial wheel has slipped a little. He sees this as an indication that his time is up, and becomes a renouncer, giving the throne to his eldest son. Then the wheel disappears. The son seeks advice of a 'royal hermit', and is urged to carry out the duties of the monarch, that is, to be a moral example himself, to provide protection for all in the kingdom, to prevent wrong-doing, and to give wealth to whoever is poor. This is done, the kingdom goes on, the wheel returns. But, after many repetitions of this there comes a time when the king does not inquire about his duty but rather 'governs by his own ideas'; in

particular he provides protection but does not bestow wealth, and so poverty becomes widespread. A theft takes place. The first time, when the king learns that it has happened because the man cannot support his family, he tries to ease the situation by giving wealth to the thief to maintain himself and his family, but on hearing this some people decide that stealing is profitable. Theft continues. The king then concludes that he cannot resolve the problem this way and turns to punishment. But, in contrast to the tendency in the Brahmanic stories to emphasise punishment, punishment in the Buddhist story only leads to the thieves taking up arms, and thus to violence, disorder, murder, and the continuous diminution of life-span, along with evil speaking, lying, adultery, immorality, incest, all forms of human wickedness. The very taste of good food disappears; human relationships vanish and the world falls into promiscuity.

The obvious message of the story is that the Buddhist state should be a welfare state, that is, it must bestow wealth upon the destitute. However, there is a subterranean message that illustrates the inadequacy of simple subsidies: giving money to the thief leads to more theft because people see it doubly in their self-interest to steal! Ambedkar, who tells this story in his 'The Buddha and Karl Marx', emphasizes another aspect still, the necessity for a moral code covering not just the king but all citizens of the state:

> This is probably the finest picture of what happens when moral force fails and brutal force takes its place. What the Buddha wanted was that each man should be morally trained that he may himself become a sentinel for the kingdom of righteousness (Ambedkar 1987: 459).

While the Buddhist tradition can be said to be grappling with the problem of individual and public responsibility in crime and the way in which society could deal with it, there is, notably, no similar text in Brahmanical literature that even considers 'bestowing wealth on the destitute'.

The propagators of the Buddhist Dhamma were quite conscious that in contrast with that of Brahmanism they were offering an ethics for the state. This is seen in two Jatakas. In the long one dealing with the ideological contestation with Brahmanism, the reference is to 'The Brahman's Veda, Khattiya's polity' which victimise society (#543). What this 'Khattiya polity' means is defined in another

Jataka (#528) in which five evil doctrines are refuted. These are the denial of karma, the assertion about the existence of a supreme being, the 'doctrine of previous actions' (determinism), the belief that a person is annihilated at death, and the 'Kshatriya doctrine' that 'a man must serve his own interests, even should he have to kill his own father' or other kinsmen. This is evidently a reference to the *swadharma* of the Kshatriya which was being taught in concrete form in the *Bhagawad Gita* and the *Mahabharata*: a warrior's duty is to carry out war, even kill kinsmen as elaborated in the lessons of the *Arthashastra* in which a ruler pays little heed to the normal moral commitments of human society. The state in Buddhist society, though far removed from the communistic, democratic non-violence of the Sangha, should be an ethical one.

The Brahmans and Caste

In regard to the emerging social system of birth-determined caste, Buddhism most clearly shows its rejection of Brahmanism. In his reply in the *Vasetthasutta* of the *Sutta Nipata* to the question of whether it is birth (*jati*) or moral conduct (*kamma*) that makes a Brahman, the Buddha points out that whereas grass and trees, insects, snakes, fish and birds have diverse species—he uses the term *jati*—among humans this is not so: 'men alone show not that nature stamps them as different jatis. They differ not in hair, head, ears or eyes, in mouth or nostrils, not in eyebrows, lips, throat, shoulders, belly, buttocks, back or chest.' He goes on to say that one who lives by keeping cows is a farmer or *kassako*; one who lives by handicrafts is a *sippiko*; one who lives by selling merchandise is a *vanijjo*, one who lives by services done for hire is a *pessiko* or wage-worker; one who lives by taking things not his is a *coro* or robber; one who lives by warfare is a *yodhajivao* or soldier; one who lives by sacrificial rites is a *yajako* or priest; one who rules is a monarch or *raja* (*Sutta Nipata* #596, 600–619). Interestingly, the Buddha does not here use the common terms for the four varnas, including shudra or kshatriya; rather it is terms that today still survive as roots for functional occupations. The term for kshatriya or 'Khattiya' appears in the Pali texts as the equivalent of noble, primarily for the ruling clans of the *gana-sanghas*, and the term shudra never appears except when the four varnas are explicitly referred to.

Another sutta in the *Sutta Nipata*, the *Vasalasutta*, makes the same point that whether a person is a 'wastrel' is also determined by action, not birth; and in doing so it uses the example of Matanga, the son of a Chandala, who wins glory, fame and paradise by his actions and in the process draws masses of Brahmans and Khattiyas to serve him.

The Buddha's most important adversaries were the Brahmans, the most powerful social group of his time and the aspiring builders of a very different kind of civilisation and religious tradition. His handling of them reflects his awareness of this. Brahmans are treated with respect; they are depicted as coming to the Buddha for advice and support; they are described as being converted and recognising his greatness—just as the main Brahmanic gods are described. At the same time, the major characteristics of their social power—the ritual, the sacrifice, and the ascription of human beings to categories according to their birth—are strongly contested.

Typical of his handling of Brahmans is another sutta in the *Sutta Nipata*, 'Brahmanism's Golden Age' (*Brahmanadhammika Sutta*). Here the Buddha describes the original state of Brahmans as one of rectitude and simple living; sacrifices were indeed held, but only ghee, rice and other goods were used, not living beings. Brahmans lived as celibates for 48 years before they marry and then living faithfully with one wife in love-marriages, not with purchased brides. After this, the Buddha tells us, corruption came and Brahmans become desirous of wealth and tempt kings into spending huge amounts on brutal sacrifices of animal and human beings. This results in an overwhelming degradation. Here respect is proclaimed for the Brahman ideal while showing in detail how this ideal is divorced from the actuality of Brahman practices in his day. The same appropriation of the ideal, interpreted as a life of simplicity and rectitude, is seen in the way in which he sometimes uses the term 'Brahman' along with 'samana' to describe the bhikku as an ideal human being.

Many examples of Brahmans converting are shown, the most famous example being that of Bavari. He is depicted as a wealthy and powerful householder, living on the banks of the Godavari in what is now Maharashtra, who sends a group of his followers to meet the Buddha and seek his help in dealing with a threat made by a rogue against him. (This is taken as evidence for the early penetration of Buddhism into Maharashtra). The followers ask many

questions, and declare themselves convinced, delighted and converted (the *Parayanavagga* of the *Sutta Nipata*). The general pattern here seems to be a kind of 'advertising'—the endorsement to the Dhamma given by those associated to whatever degree with intellectual attainment, morality and status.

Nevertheless, because of his criticism of sacrifice, ritual and Brahmanic birth pretensions, the Buddha's relationship with Brahmans was adversarial and is sometimes shown as such. A good example of this is the dialogue with Ambattha in the *Ambattha Suttanta* of the *Digha Nikaya*. Ambattha, a proud young Brahman who enters the vihara with insulting words, and then defends his insults by describing its inhabitants as 'shavelings, sham friars, menial black fellows, the offspring of our kinsmen's heels.' (The latter phrase refers to the Brahmanic notion that shudras were born of the feet of Purusha). Gotama then takes up the theme of birth, and shows that Ambattha's own ancestor Kanha was born as a dark-skinned slave of the Sakyas ('kanha' or its Sanskritised version '*krsna*' in fact means 'black'). Then, when Ambattha falls into turmoil and his companions mock him, he tells them, 'Be not too severe in disparaging Ambattha the Brahman on the grounds of his descent. That Kanha became a mighty seer.' The Buddha then announces, in a common verse of the time, 'The Khattiya is the best of those among this folk who put their trust in lineage; but he who is perfect in wisdom and righteousness, he is the best among gods and men.' Thus he simultaneously announces that Khattiyas are superior to Brahmans at a social level, but at a spiritual level it is wisdom and righteousness that count.

Buddhist texts are consistent throughout in emphasising that righteous and wise men can come from any varna, may be born in any social group. Several Jatakas condemn the varna system and untouchability; in one the Boddhisattva is born as a famous Candala teacher who becomes a guru; but his pupil is unwilling to admit before others that he has learned from a 'low-born' guru and so comes to grief. Here the *gatha* is given: '*Be it Khattiya, Brahman, Vessa, he from whom a man learns right—Sudda, Candala, Pukkasa—seems chiefest in his sight*' (#474). Numerous suttas also condemn ascription based on birth in general.

Respect for Labour: The Farmer and the Artisan

Aside from the denial of birth-related caste, the Buddhist categorisation of social groups is totally different from that accepted in the Brahmanical ideology. The nobility and claim to high birth of the Khattiyas is occasionally mentioned. Brahmans exist as a category, one of the main ones with whom the Buddha is in dialogue; but their claims to superiority of birth are denied. The most frequent term for respectable people living in the world is 'householder' or *gahapat*i, which refers above all to farmers in a category ranging from wealthy farmers to small property-holder peasants; the *gahapati* is frequently paired with wage-workers or *dasa-kammakaras*. But the early Buddhist texts mentions little of actual slavery, except in regard to slaves of the king. The servants depicted in the Pali texts were most often paid.

Possession of property was the crucial characteristic of the *gahapati*: he is a manager and controller of property, and when he ceases to be so is no longer given that status. He was inevitably a male (though wealthy and independent women like Ambapalli appear in the Buddhist scriptures, they are never referred to as *gahapatis*). He was also a tax-payer and the pivot of the economy, and was most identified with agriculture. The gahapati is described variously as 'a free man, one who cultivates his land, one who pays taxes and thus increases the king's wealth' and was depicted as carrying on various agricultural activities including ploughing and harrowing the field, sowing at the proper time, irrigating his land. While setthis or merchants could be included with gahapatis, there was always a compound term used: *setthi-gahapati*; the terms are never used interchangeably. Thus the gahapatis were most typically farmers, ranging from poor owner-cultivators to some very large landowners who used hired labourers (Chakravarty 1996: 73–74).

This contrasts with the increasingly tendency of Brahmanical texts to depict farmers in degrading terms. While farmers were classified as Vaishyas in the varna hierarchy by the early texts of Brahmanism, agriculture nevertheless was a rather despised profession. In the *Manusmriti*, Manu includes farming the land as an occupation of the Vaishya, (1, 89), but he also says 'By making a living from crafts or business or from cows, horses, and carts, by

begetting children only with servant women, by farming the land, by serving a king…families who are bereft of Vedic verses quickly perish' (3, 49). Similarly, farmers were excluded from offers to the dead, along with a weird collection of categories ranging from slanderers and lepers to 'anyone who diverts streams, or who amuses himself by damming them up' (3, 165). 'Farming the land is traditionally known as the "deadly" mode of life' and is forbidden to the Brahman, though he can subsist by merely gleaning corn and gathering grains' (4, 5). The justification given is non-violence.

> *A priest or ruler who makes a living by the livelihood of a commoner should try hard to avoid farming, which generally causes violence and is dependent on others. Some people think, 'Farming is a virtuous trade' but as a livelihood it is despised by good people, for the wooden (plough) with the iron mouth injures the earth and the creatures that live in the earth'* (10, 84).

In Buddhism, in ironic contrast to Brahmanic tendencies to justify its disdain for agriculture by stressing the 'violence' in farming, the cultivator of land was seen in respectable terms. The category of 'gahapati' indicates this as do other word derivations: *shreshti* (the world for guild head) related to the word for superior, *shresth*, or *sethi* in Prakrit, gives us surnames found today among non-Brahmans like Shetty (in Karnataka) and Shete (in Maharashtra)—and the common word for 'farmer/peasant' in Marathi, *shetkari*. Similarly, the Tamil word for 'farmer' or *vyavasayi*, derives from a term used otherwise for 'professional' or 'occupational'. It is an inherently respectable term, and the *Kural* accords respect to the agriculturalist:

> *Howe'er they roam, the world must follow still the plougher's team;*
> *though toilsome, culture of the ground as noblest toil esteem.*
> *The ploughers are the linch-pin of the world; they bear*
> *them up who other works perform, too weak its toils to share.*
> *Who ploughing eat their food, they truly live;*
> *the rest to others bend subservient, eating what they give…*
> *They ask nothing from others but to askers give,*
> *who raise with their own hands the food on which they live (#104).*

In contrast to the Brahmanical tendency to downgrade physical labour, considering agriculture low, classifying herders, those who

care for horses, carpenters and medical healers among the degraded castes, Buddhism gives a dignified place to it. In many Jatakas the Boddhisattva is a farmer or an artisan or a poor wage-worker; and often shown as a skilled ironsmith, or carpenter, or engineer. And, as we shall see in Chapter 4, 'pollution' and 'untouchability' are categories that Buddhism simply rejects.

Women, Desire and Homelessness

Vedic society was a male-dominated one, like most nomadic pastoral societies. However, 'patriarchy' (or the patriarchal household) as such began only with the rise of the state and the beginning of class-based exploitation, and this happened most clearly in India around the middle of the first millennium BC. (The Indus civilisation is yet too unknown to be clearly characterised with regard to either its political forms or its patriarchal tendencies). Women are associated with the household, and as childbirth begins to weigh them down they become tied to it, increasingly subordinated to the dominant patriarch in the emerging household-based kin system. This clearly was happening in India of that period. As part of this, in the samana tradition, which focused on the 'homeless', as well as among Brahmanic wandering philosopher-priests, women were under-represented, regardless of traditions which indicate that in early periods women were gurus and philosophers.

In the Indian cosmological traditions, both Brahmanic and samanic, the female principle (*prakriti*) was generally conceived of as active, as opposed to the contemplative and passive male principle (*purusha*). With the growth of patriarchal social relations, the passive and contemplative became the valued and 'higher' goal. The activity, energy and sexuality of women was interpreted as part of 'maya' and was seen as leading to bondage to the world. In spite of Tantric trends focusing on shakti symbolised by the 'power' of women, the dominant religious goal was one of the achieving release from such bondage. From this point of view women, because of their sexuality and activism, were considered less able to achieve liberation themselves and were, in addition, viewed as a source of temptation to men.

However, while both Buddhism (and the samana tradition in general) and Brahmanism as the main ideological-philosophical

doctrines of the time reflected the emerging patriarchal relations, they did so in very different ways—and in turn impacted on these in very different ways. Buddhism admitted women into the Sangha, with a socially inferior status but as spiritual equals to men, and also gave much less social legitimacy to male control within the family (here as elsewhere I am indebted to Uma Chakravarty; see especially her essays on Brahmanical patriarchy; Chakravarty 1987; 1993).

As we have seen in Introduction, women were admitted into the Sangha only reluctantly, and then with a large number of rules that symbolised their subordination. In explaining these rules, the Buddha is reported as saying, in the *Mahavagga* of the *Vinaya*,

> *Just, Ananda, as houses in which there are many women and but few men are easily violated by robber burglars; just so, Ananda, under whatever doctrine and discipline women are allowed to go out from the household life into the homeless state, that religion cannot last long….And just, Ananda, as when the disease called blight falls upon a field of sugarcane in good condition, that field of sugarcane does not continue long; just so, Ananda, under whatever doctrine and discipline women are allowed to go forth from the household life into the homeless state, that religion does not last long. And just, Ananda, as a man would in anticipation build an embackment to a great reservoir, beyond which the water shall not overpass; just even so, Ananda, have I in anticipation laid down these Eight Chief Rules for the Bhikkunis, their life long not to be overpassed.*[5]

The eight rules were as follows: (1) a bhikkuni, however elderly, should give salutations to a bhikku of any age; (2) a bhikkuni should never stay for the rainy season in an area where there is no bhikku; (3) a bhikkuni should ask the bhikku sangha for the date for certain ceremonies; (4) the Bhikkuni should confess here faults before both the Bhikku and Bhikkuni sanghas; (5) discipline for any faults should be undergone before both Sanghas; (6) a bhikkuni should ask permission for the final initiation before both Sanghas; (7) a bhikkuni should never revile a bhikku; (8) a bhikkuni should never give official admonition to a bhikku (322–24).

[5] The metaphors here, referring to rice, sugarcane and irrigation (a large reservoir) show the state of agriculture at the time this section of the Vinaya was finalised.

Even when the Bhikkuni Sangha was formed, still the most praise was given to the women householders who had supported the Sangha, rather than to the bhikkunis. The ideal for women, as far as the Buddha himself was concerned, was the householders' life. Women were essential to maintain the household, and a modified and humanised form of a patriarchal family is supported. The ideal is depicted in the *Sigalavada Suttanta*:

> *A husband should serve his wife as the western quarter in five ways; by honoring her, by respecting her; by remaining faithful to her; by giving her charge of the home; and by duly giving her adornments. And thus served by her husband as the western quarter a wife should care for him in five ways: she should be efficient in her household tasks; she should manage her servants well; she should be chaste; she should take care of the goods which he brings home; and she should be skillful and untiring in all her duties…*(*Digha Nikaya* III, 30).

Thus, at one level the Buddha did not challenge the developing patriarchy, and in the Jatakas we can find extreme forms of the belief that women are inherently deceitful and sexually abandoned. However, the forms of patriarchy maintained by the Dhamma were still far different from the life ordained for women in the *Manusmriti* and other orthodox Brahmanical texts. Two notable points are absent from the Buddhist texts. Nowhere is the ideal of *pativrata* endorsed; while women are often depicted in Buddhism as lustful and deceitful, nowhere is the control of men over them endorsed as it is with Manu. The relationship between husband and wife proclaimed in the *Sigalavada Suttanta* is one of inequality, but it is also one of reciprocity and there is no hint in it of women's inherent need for male control.

The second and most crucial difference is that in the end the thesis of *anatta*, the denial of an essential 'self' extends to women's selves also. In the debate regarding their admission to the Sangha, the Buddha himself is forced by Ananda to admit that there is nothing in woman's essential nature that makes them different from men, in regard to worldly life or spiritual life. Thus, the crucial question asked by Anand is whether women are capable of going into the 'homeless life', of becoming enlightened, becoming Arahats (*Kullavagga*, 322). And the Buddha replies that they are, and opens up the Sangha to them.

The general patriarchy of the society as well as the release felt by many women who became bhikkunis, is shown in the *Therigatha*, the songs of the women who became bhikkunis. Kathryn Blackstone, comparing the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha* (songs of bhikkus), notes that women were much more likely to talk of their family and other relationships, on one hand; and that most of the images of the decaying, filthy body which were described by both men and women were images specifically of the female body (Blackstone 2000: 59–81).

Thus, two nuns' songs, those of Sumangala's mother and of Mutta, include those relating to liberation from a human being, the husband, whereas the similar version by a monk (that of Sumangala) speaks only of the tools of his labour:

> *So freed! So freed! So thoroughly freed am I! –*
> *From three crooked things set free:*
> *from my pestle, my shameless husband and his sun-shade making*
> *my moldy old pot with its water-snake smell.*
> *Aversion and passion I cut with a chop.*
> *Having come to the foot of a tree, I meditate, Absorbed in the bliss:*
> *'What bliss!* (*Therigatha* 2000: II.3)

Another beautiful depiction of a this-worldly achievement of *nibbana* is the song by Patacara:

> *Ploughing the field with ploughs, sowing the ground with seed,*
> *supporting their wives and children, young men gather up wealth.*
> *So why is it that I, consummate in virtue, a doer of the teacher's bidding, don't gain Unbinding [nibbana]? I'm not lazy or proud.*
> *Washing my feet, I noticed the water.*
> *And in watching it flow from high to low*
> *my heart was composed like a fine thoroughbred steed.*
> *Then taking a lamp, I entered the hut,*
> *checked the bedding, sat down on the bed.*
> *And taking a pin, I pulled out the wick:*
> *Like a flame's unbinding was the liberation of awareness* (*Therigatha* 2000, V.10).

Patacara is later described as teaching others and as being honored by them as a senior and liberated nun.

Another song, describing graphically the changes due to old age and contrasting them with 'the truth of the Truth-speakers' words'

is attributed to the famous courtesan Ambapalli, while a story of 'Subha and the libertine' describes how a nun avoids a man trying to seduce her by emphasising how her body will become decrepit and in the end plucks out her eye. Clearly women are exposed to different dangers in the 'homeless' life than men!

In the centuries following the Buddha's death, many women from royal families became nuns and it seems that women often supported Buddhism while men turned to Shaivism or other Brahmanical sects. In regions of more matrilineal tendencies, nuns had a stronger position. In western India, for example, the inscriptions of the Satavahana period record women as giving donations on their own, which means that they must have controlled property on their own, while Nagarjunakhonda, a famous series of monasteries, is attributed to the donations of women.

In the context of women's social bondage to the household, the tendency in Buddhism to take the 'homeless life' as the pre-requisite for liberation tended to discriminate against women. But the denial of essence—the denial that women were essentially creatures of desire, that they essentially required male control—limited this Buddhist patriarchy. The anti-women trends so visible in the historical forms of Buddhism were situational and contingent. The Buddhism of the first millennium BCE only weakly opposed the patriarchal sentiments that pervaded the society, affecting men and even the Buddha himself. At the same time, the anti-essentialism of basic Buddhist philosophy provided a fundamental equalitarianism that Brahmanism lacked.

3

Transitoriness and Transformations

'All is flux.' The principle of *anicca* was fundamental to Buddhism, and the Buddha applied it to the Dhamma itself when he predicted that it would die away after some centuries. There are different forms of 'dying away'—vanishing as a name and symbol, and vanishing in actuality, i.e., being transformed into something else in the normal social process of becoming institutionalised. The transformations of the Dhamma, through Theravada and Mahayana and Vajrayana, have been so great as to lead a scholar like Richard Gombrich to even question whether there is an underlying core in all the three forms that would allow them to be all called by the same name of 'Buddhism' (Gombrich 1997: 6).

Some of the special problems of Buddhism may have arisen from the fact that its rigorous moral orientation to individual discipline has been difficult to assimilate as a social phenomenon. So little concession has been made to social and psychological 'needs' for a religion that the pressures to actually change the basic teachings must have been great. Perhaps this has been the basis of the story that the Buddha was originally reluctant to teach, thinking that there would be little basis for humans to absorb his insight.

The problem might be illustrated by the *Lakkhana Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* in which the Buddha is shown to have the 32 physical characteristics that constitute the 'marks of a superman', signs belonging to one who will either become a world monarch or a supreme Buddha. In his introduction to this sutta, Rhys Davids argues that these '*lakkhana*' were drawn from brahmanic traditions and argues that Buddha in effect replied very differently to what makes a man 'very wise or a superman':

> *I also call a man of four qualities very wise, a superman. And what are those qualities? (1) He concerns himself with the advantage and the welfare of the great masses of people, many are the folk he has established in the Ariyan system, that is in the beauty of righteousness as set forth in the Ariyan path. (2) He can think about a thing or not, just as he wishes; he can harbour an aspiration or not, just as he wishes. Thus is he master of his mind in the trends of thought. (3) He can enter at his pleasure without toil or trouble into the four ecstasies that are beyond thought and yet pertain to this present life. (4) He has put away the intoxications arising from lust and becomings from speculation and ignorance. Thus does he gain and abide in that sane emancipation of heart and mind that he knows and realises even in this present life* (Rhys Davids 1921: 134).

This is a statement of *nibbana* here and now, as a psychological state marked by freedom from passion and control over the mind while compassion and love (*karuna* and *metta*) remain. However, the magical 32 marks appear in early Buddhist sources, and influenced the depiction of the Buddha in sculpture. The fact is that while the Buddha himself may have defined a 'superman' in social and psychological terms, social expectations looked for something superhuman, and their impact on the nature of developments in Buddhism is evident.

The Buddha had to cast his teachings in terms of the expectations and the capabilities of his audience. He fought against ritualism, superstition and hero-worship, dependence on a god, and the elaboration of cosmologies, refusing to even call himself the head of the Sangha. In their place he substituted righteousness, a concern for mass welfare, and control of mental aspirations, thoughts and emotions. But the prevalence in society of the need for cosmologies, a god, and ritualism made it almost inevitable that these would enter into Buddhism itself.

Buddhism and Language

'Popular Buddhism' almost by definition is in the language of the people. Most existing Buddhist literature is not. Sanskrit, obviously, was the language of intellectuals and to some extent the court elites; but the Pali canon was written in a language that was

close to that spoken in Magadha at the time of the Buddha and which later developed as a lingua franca. With time, however, the developing vernaculars of the different regions of the country diverged increasingly from Pali also (for a good summary, see Rhys Davids 1917: 152–57 and Bloch 1970: 1–38).

There must have been a tremendous amount of literature—writings, stories, songs, fables, beyond this. Buddhism from the beginning had a missionary impulse, and the Buddha was adamant that it be taught in the language of the people and not the 'Vedic language' (*Kullavagga* V, 33, 1). Throughout Asia, as Buddhist bhikkhus travelled teaching the Dhamma in the languages of the people, they played a major role in developing these vernaculars as 'national languages'; in societies with developed class hierarchies they gave status to the language of the common people. Victor Mair illustrates this for China, Korea and Japan, contrasting the positive attitude in India to the *deshabhasha* (the language of the country or locality) with the Mandarin disdain for 'folk talk' in China. Buddhists valorised the Prakrits (*prakrta*, literally 'made before') as 'natural' languages, that is unadorned, unrefined, seeing the elite Sanskrit (*samskrta*, literally 'made together,' i.e., refined) as 'artificial' (Mair 1994: 724). Mair also writes very strikingly of the impact made by songs and verses of the Buddhist missionaries: 'Probably more important in raising the consciousness of some Chinese…was the Buddhist penchant for psalmody. There was no precedent in the indigenous literary and religious traditions for the flood of sacred singing and chanting that engulfed China with Buddhism.'

The real contrast, however, in terms of attitudes towards popular language is not so much between India and China as between Buddhism and the elites (Chinese or Indian). The Indian Brahmanic elite, who were similar to the Chinese mandarins, cultivated Sanskrit as a 'pure' and elevated language, and disdained the 'Prakrits'. These were considered as low languages of the people who could not properly pronounce or understand the high language. Elitism in India took different forms, not because it was less elitist, but because the 'lower' castes (Shudras and Dalits) were forbidden to speak Sanskrit, while Brahmans maintained a monopoly on sacred learning. In China, in contrast, the elite language was difficult but open to everyone, even those from the lowest social strata, who could find the resources to learn it. This had the effect of developing a more exclusive and closed elite in India, but it also meant they

had to allow the development of popular languages and eventually give them some recognition.

The 'Prakrits' (local languages which includes the so-called 'Dravidian' as well as 'Indo-European' languages) began their development as regional–national languages of India during the period of Buddhism.[1] In Tamil, the earliest to develop, some of this Buddhist- and Jaina-influenced literature is preserved, including the *Kural* and the poetic novels or *kavyas*, in the post–Sangam period. There is also a belief among many Tamils that the sage Agastya, credited with being the first teacher of Tamil, was a Buddhist, not a Brahman *rishi* as the orthodox tradition has it. The growth of the Prakrit 'Maharashtri', which later become Marathi, also took place early, during the Satavahana period up to the 4th century CE, a time of major influence of Buddhism. Eastern Indian languages also developed through the medium of Buddhist literature. According to N.K. Sahu, who sees Tantra as originating in Orissa, the language of the songs of Buddhist wandering tantrics during the 8th–10th centuries of the Common Era was 'the parent stock of modern Oriya, Bengali, Maithili and Assamese' (Sahu 1958: 156–57).

What was the reason then, of Mahayana literature being in Sanskrit? By the 1st century onwards, the Prakrit-Pali in which the Theravada classics were preserved had also become an elite language. As other languages developed throughout India, Pali could not really be the 'language of the country' that the Buddha had advised his disciples to preach in. Sanskrit by that time had developed as complex and difficult elite language, but it nevertheless appeared to be the only one that could link the different regions of the country. Thus much of the high scholarship of the Mahayana monks was also carried on in Sanskrit. In addition, Chinese and Tibetan monks learned and preserved Mahayana literature only in Sanskrit and translated from that. But popular Mahayana was written, recited and sung in the vernaculars, as is shown by the Tibetan chronicler Taranatha who notes how the songs of some early Mahayana preachers were recited widely among the common people 'beginning from the marketplace to the king's palace' (*Taranatha* 1990: 101).

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[1] For a realistic account of the actual development of Indian languages (as opposed to the elite notion that the Prakrits are offshoots of Sanskrit), see Rhys Davids, (1997: 150–58), and Cardona, 'Middle Indo-Aryan' (1997).

The fact that the existing texts available to us are in a certain language (for example Pali or Sanskrit) does not prove that their originals were in the same language. Further, the lack of sources from vernacular literature has created a huge gap in information about popular Buddhism and the way in which large sections of people of the time reacted to the Buddha's teachings.

Popular Buddhism: The Jatakas, Stupas and Statues

There is, however, one major source that is not derived from the monastic tradition and which suggests how the masses of people understood Buddhism: the Jataka stories. These stories were drawn from local vernaculars and local folklore and were translated into Pali. While the dates are, as with most of the literature, difficult to fix, the *gathas* (songs) may be the oldest, but the stories of the past (the prose commentary) are equally old and are normally attributed to the pre-Mauryan period, though they occasionally reflect Mauryan or even Satavahana conditions. The introduction to the stories themselves give further stories about the Buddha and his time; these again are assumed to be of a later date. The short, simple Jatakas of the collection are the earliest, the longer ones are of a later period while those dealing with Candalas are considered later additions (Rhys Davids 1917: 189–209; Sharma 1958: 91–93). Here we will deal only with the 'religious' aspects of the stories; some of their social implications will be considered in Chapter 5.

First, of course, these are 'birth' stories, centering around the former births of Gotama and his closest companions and supporters (Ananda, Sariputta, Gotama's wife and mother, to name only a few) and one enemy (Devadatta) since stories often require a villain. In doing so they rely on the karma/rebirth frame. Its use shows the degree to which some immutable 'self' is indeed assumed; that is, transmigration appears to be an inevitable accompaniment of the frame. Not only are specific people or personalities identified as having undergone previous births; situations and event-types are repeated, and character traits seem often to hold through a whole round of births.

Still, the karma/rebirth frame used in the stories is strikingly different from the reward–punishment calculus of the Brahmanic

varnashrama dharma. Though the Bodhisattva is most often a noble, Brahman or merchant-farmer, he is often also of lower births. For example, he is born as a drummer (#59; numbers refer to the accepted number of the Jatakas; see *Jatakas* 1985), a conch-blower (#60), a doctor specialising in snake-bites (#69), a gardener (#70), an acrobat (#116), a stone-cutter (#137), a potter (#178), the 'lowest caste' (#179), a wage-earning poor man (#201), an acrobat-beggar (#212), an elephant trainer (#231), a musician (#243), a forester (#265), a 'pariah' (#309), a smith (#387), a poor wage earner (#390), a potter (#408), a poor wage-earner (#418), a master mariner (#463), a carpenter (#466), and a Candala (#474, 497, 498). In none of these stories is there a hint that the 'low' birth is due to some sins committed in a past life. Generally, the varying states and statuses of human existence are not seen as too different; if there is 'punishment' for past sins it is expressed in particular misfortunes not related with social status. In fact, it is existence as a human being, of whatever class or 'caste', that uniquely offers the opportunity for choice and freedom, denied even to birth as a 'god' or 'demon'. Rewards and punishment are thus explained not so much in terms of birth as a human of low or high status, but most often in terms of spending ages in heavens or hells, with the latter often luridly described. This indicates that as far as most people were concerned, it was the promise/threat of future heavens and hells which was important as the foundation for a morality of righteousness.

Second, the Jatakas show the degree to which the notion of 'God' as a supreme divinity was absent from the consciousness of most Indians of the time. There are of course *devas,* 'gods,' just as there are *rakshasas, asuras, yakkhas* and *yakkhis* ('goblins, ogres, fairies'), who are slightly superior but still bound beings, subject to the wheel of birth and death. The most widely referred to of these is Sakka, the 'king of the gods'. While he rules over a beautiful and luxurious heaven, he is in fact nothing other than a status to which particularly good individuals may be reborn. He is prompted (by his 'throne becoming hot') to act in many cases; he fears lest he lose his position; and the Bodhisattva is many times born, for a period, as Sakka. There is no hint in this either of the transcendent creator God of the western tradition or the all-pervasive Brahma of Brahmanical philosophy.

Third, both the ongoing conflict with Brahmanism and respect for Brahmans is shown in the Jatakas. There is some ambiguity; for instance characters go often to Takkasila (Taxila) where the learning

they receive often centers around the 'three Vedas',[2] a respected bit of knowledge. At the same time the Vedas are criticised and even mocked. In what is evidently an old *gatha* tradition, a person is first criticised for admiring the Vedas, and he agrees

A thousand Vedas will not safety bring
failing just works, or save from evil plight;
the Vedas then must be a useless thing;
true doctrine is—control yourself, do right

and then the original critic backtracks, says the Vedas are not completely useless, but puts them in their place:

To study well the Vedas fame will bring,
but by right conduct we attain to bliss (#377, 487).

In contrast to this ironic approach to the Vedas themselves, the Vedic sacrifice is forcefully, often ferociously criticised throughout Pali literature, with bad Brahmans urging it on kings and the Bodhisattva opposing it. An amusing Jataka tells the story of a jackal whose hair, except for a top tuft, is singed in a fire; he then pretends to be a Brahman with the exalted name of Bharadvaj who has gained his reputation by performing sacrifices. The Bodhisattva finally exposes him, saying 'It is not sanctity, Bharadvaj, votary of the Fire-God, but gluttony that has decked your crown with that top-knot' (#129).

The attitude towards the Buddha/Bodhisattva shown in these stories is not so much of awe and devotion to a powerful being as of high respect. He is described as the 'Great Being' but while he is often superbly and extravagantly self-sacrificing, he is often also simply clever and good. At times he is shown as falling prey to lust or to pride (#490); once he fathers an illegitimate child (#487), and in two Jatakas he is a robber. Interestingly, even though he yields to passion in such stories, he is shown as admitting this because he cannot lie. This may indicate a morality in which lying and murder are taken to be by far worse sins than sexual intercourse or even taking others' property. But it is clear that devotional Buddhism

[2] These early references to the Vedas always identify them as being three in number. Evidently the Atharva Veda was at that time not given a canonical status.

came later than these popular stories. Some of the most famous of the stories of 'giving' indicate a compulsion to give arising out of desire for merit rather than any compassion. For example, in the long and famous Jataka about Prince Vessantara, the Bodhisattva, out of desire to gain 'omniscience' gives away his two children, deceiving his wife in the process, to an evil Brahman who he knows will treat them cruelly (#547).

Beyond the Jatakas, the existence of stupas and the growing significance of statues shows much about the nature of popular Buddhism.

The form of Buddhist devotion most encouraged was gifts to the Sangha, which emphasised the importance of the organised community of practitioners. But for the lay followers, there were a few rituals along with the important custom of worshipping relics of the Buddha. These were endorsed in the Pali canon. Fascination for the relics of the Buddha is shown as beginning right from the time of his death. The *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* reports an extended division of his ashes, with requests for these from the king of Maghada, from the Licchavis, the Sakiyas, the Bulis, the Koliyas, Brahmans and clans of Mallas at many villages. Some went also to the Nagas. The tooths of the Buddha were said to be honoured even in heaven, while one was kept in Kalinga, and another one went to the Nagas (*Digha Nikaya* II, 6, 24–27). The 'mounds' in which the ashes were kept became the first objects of devotion. Thus, out of a very ancient tradition of burial mounds, arose the stupas; it is these and not temples which are the oldest religious architecture still surviving in India.

The veneration of relics and of stupas became a major aspect of popular Buddhism, and are mentioned in the Jatakas and in *The Questions of Milinda*. In the latter book the teacher Nagasena specifically allows this for lay followers, even though it is meaningless to the Buddha himself: 'If gods or men put up a building to contain the jewel treasure of the relics of a Tathagata who does not accept their gift, still by that homage paid to the attainment of the supreme good…do they themselves attain to one or other of the three glorious states.' However, in an attempt to resolve an apparent contradiction in Buddhist teachings, he argues that it is only bhikkhus who were included in the injunction not to worship relics, (*Milindapanha* 1963: 146).

Stupas not only became ubiquitous they gradually became elaborate and costly. They were put up everywhere, to memorialise

people and events of all kinds connected with the Buddha. According to a legend Asoka himself was responsible for the building of 84,000 stupas; Chinese travellers saw large numbers of these. Later Mahayana texts glorify their construction, one referring to 'those magnificent stupas, made of seven precious substances…always decorated with flags; a multitude of bells is constantly sounding; men, gods, goblins and Titans pay their worship with flowers, perfumes and music' (*Saddharmapandarika* 1974: 15). As old (though not surviving) were the *viharas* or residences for monks. The caves, found mostly in western India where they were constructed under the Satavahanas and their successors, were also found in the north and east, and included viharas and chaityas or meeting halls, but often also featured stupas in the halls. Many of the halls had elaborately carved columns; they recorded the names of the donors, often included statues of royalty (such as some of the Satavahana kings), with many entrances, verandas and later statues of the Buddha.

For several centuries there were no images of the Buddha himself; instead a blank spot was shown where he otherwise would have been sitting or standing, and he was symbolised by a wheel, an empty throne, footprints or a pipal tree (the 'bo tree'). This was motivated by the idea that he had really 'gone away' after his death. But images eventually began to be built, and became the focus of worship. The first images were produced in Mathura probably around the end of the 1st century BCE, and were inspired by early *yakkha* figures on the stupas and the Jain figures, and almost the same time in the lower Kabul valley/upper Indus area images influenced by Greek art began to be produced by the Gandharva school (Basham 1958: 368).

The lay disciples were encouraged to spend a part of their time following the discipline appropriate to bhikkhus. In *The Questions of Milinda*, for example, the king is shown, after his discussions with Nagasena, undertaking the observance of vows, putting aside his normal clothes and dressing like a bhikkhu with yellow robe and turban; for seven days he decides no legal cases and watches over all body acts, filling his heart with love and showing 'a meek and lowly disposition' to slaves, servants and dependents (*Milindapanha* 1963: 138). It is normal in Theravada countries like Myanmar even today for most young men to spend some time in a monastery; the origin of this probably lies in the popular Buddhism in early India.

There were no rituals designed for householders, because Buddhism very consciously and firmly advocated the replacement of sacrifice and ritual by moral relationships. However, some compromises were made, for instance in the use of 'protection chants' called *paritta*. These were mentioned in the *Questions of Milinda* and their use was reluctantly admitted (213–19). These represented a kind of adaption of customary chants for protection against those bad spirits (*yakkhas*) that Buddhists believed in along with most others of their time. Kalupahana's study of Buddhist philosophy notes that where Buddhist lay people 'take refuge' in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, this never implies an orientation to a superior being; they seek 'protection' in contrast from gods and local deities; seeking protection and going for refuge are socially conceptualised as different activities (Kalupahana 1994: 113–14). He also argues that the *paritta* chants, like Tantric mantras, provided psychological satisfaction (ibid.: 225–27). In the introduction to the *Atanatiya Suttanta* dealing with the *paritta* chants, Rhys Davids mades an important observation that the Buddha never treated any kind of sentient being as evil; rather the form of the chant was also was meant to cultivate loving-kindness towards the *yakhkas*, as they like all beings were seen to be as in a process of transition not only to new births but also Enlightenment itself.

The Life of the Sangha

What was the Sangha? The 'third jewel' was itself a process. The Sangha began with the gathering together of monks who at first may have wandered independently, but then they started settling during the rainy season; after Gotama's death these temporary settlements evolved into a permanent, localised year-round residences of monks. The earliest of these were in semi-urban locations, often in donated parks, close to cities. Many centered near the stupas or memorial mounds which were objects of popular worship, and often (especially, for instance, in western India,) on trade routes. The monasteries, whether free-standing buildings found in most of India, or cave-monasteries as in the western Sahyadris, had two main types of buildings. The *vihara* or monastery was, architecturally, a large hall in the middle surrounded by the small sleeping cells of monks. The *chaitya* hall was a place for worship or meditation, with a stupa and later a Buddha image at the heart of it.

As noted in Chapter 2, the organisation of the Buddhist Sangha was unique in India, perhaps in the world. It was certainly the first monastic organisation of its type. It was governed by a written (or orally recited and memorised) code, which gave it a democratic constitution unlike any other religious organisation of its day or later. The central and earliest part of this was the *Patimokkha*, which was communally recited and consisted of the major rules, with the most severe infringement leading to expulsion—a punishment tellingly described as 'defeat'. There were also formal confession and collective decision about the offence and its penance, with reference to the rules. The word 'patimokkha' itself, according to Max Muller is derived from the term for 'bond', and in fact the *Patimokkha* was the main binding force of the collective life. This established a collective democracy within the framework of the authority of tradition; as for the tradition it has to be decided democratically. No other religious institution had any similar formal code. In Brahmanic maths and ashrams the head or guru, under whatever name, simply exercised authority. The Jain monastic organisation also had no established code. For the bhikkhu, in contrast, a collective set of rules to which everyone could appeal provided a framework for some kind of collective democracy in which the elders were the crucial decision makers (Dutt 1988: 66–70). There were also collective established ceremonies, for instance the *kapina* or distribution of robes, held at the end of the rainy season.

Strikingly, the Buddhist monk took no vow of obedience, either to the collective or to an individual. Where a single 'authority' came to head a monastery, it seems to have been linked to political patronage. It was also explicitly said that seniority was the only factor that needed to be considered to give precedence and particular respect in the Sangha. This was meant to exclude not only social status of the individual before entry, but also the privilege and precedence resulting from accomplishment in terms of the values of the Dhamma itself. This is noteworthy, considering how in Communist parties 'declassed' members dominate on the basis of ability to articulate the principles of Marxism and leadership qualities, abilities that may illustrate individual 'merit' but also are related to the social status of the individual before entering the organisation.

Though the Buddha himself was flexible regarding behaviour and the life of the Sangha must have been simple to begin with, the

Vinaya rules eventually became extremely elaborate. They regulated all aspects of the bhikkhus' relationship to one another, to the world they lived in, common habits of courtesy, how to eat, what was allowed for shelter, beds, clothing, food, etc. All such rules were justified by putting them into the mouth of the Buddha. Many rules were established with an interesting formula: a group of wicked (sometimes hilariously wicked) bhikkhus known as the Chabbaggiya bhikkhus are depicted as grossly violating some common forms of morality; the people at large murmur that the 'Sakyaputtas' are not following what is expected of a person renouncing the world, upon which the Buddha forbids such behaviour. Then, to meet the needs of old or ill bhikkhus, or for some common-sense reason, exceptions are made. Examples run throughout the Vinaya texts. While bathing, the Chabbaggiya bhikkhus rub their bodies against wood in various ways and massage each other which is forbidden, but exceptions are made to allow for a sick bhikkhu to rub a scab with a kind of back-scratcher, and an old bhikkhu to have his body bathed by others. Or, the Chabbaggiya bhikkhus burn down the forests; the Blessed One forbids this. Then a fire strikes the vihara, and the bhikkhus are afraid to set a counter-fire because it is banned, and the Blessed One then expressly allows this. (*Cullagavaga* 5, 10 and 5, 32). The Chabbaggiya bhikkhus may have been a rhetorical device, but they, and the opposite tendency to take the rules extremely literally, illustrated the problems of monastic life.

Who joined the Sangha? Who gave support to Buddhism? These are questions inherently hard to answer. We know that Buddhism found a base in urban and commercially oriented groups in contrast to the more rural focus of early Brahmanism. Many scholars have tried to draw conclusions about the social composition of the Sangha and lay supporters from lists of names given in Pali literature. These show the largest number coming from Brahmans, next from Khattiyas, and only a few from *gahapatis* and 'low'-born groups (Chakravarty 1996: 122–49). However, this does not justify a conclusion that the early Sangha drew members primarily from elites. Lists drawn from names given in the literature cannot be statistically representative of the entire population of the Sangha, since the names would have been that of the more elite, educated, articulate, prestigious, etc. (and occasionally the notoriously wicked, like Devadatta) who would have been more likely to find mention.

Imagine what would happen if an analysis of the social composition of a village (or, say, a church or synagogue) were drawn from a list of names mentioned in the official history of that village!

A more realistic depiction of membership of the Sangha may be that in Buddhaghosha's famous commentary written around in the fourth or the fifth century on the *Vasetthasutta*, the *Visuddhimagga*:

> *Why does the Buddha mention the farmer caste first? Because farmers have the least pride and they are largest in number. Often the monks from a Ksatriya family are proud of their learning; those from low castes…are unable to continue long in the order. But the young farmers plough their land while all their bodies are running with sweat…Therefore they are not proud.… From the other families not very many become monks; from the farmer's, many.*

Generalisations about well-known monks and scholars being Brahmans are also questionable since the Buddhist texts used the word 'Brahman' as a term of praise, and not in a caste sense. For instance, Asvaghosha and Buddhaghosha are among the famous Theravada monks of the early centuries of the Common Era who are described as 'Brahmans'. However, Dharmanand Kosambi and Sukumar Dutt both doubt that Buddhaghosh was a Brahman, with Dutt arguing that he was from a Telugu farming family (Bapat 1997: 188; Dutt 1988: 257). Similarly, in one Tibetan version of Asvaghosha's life, his father is a Brahman from the eastern region who married the daughter of a merchant (Dutt 1988: 245). This would mean either that 'Brahman' is used in a non-birth sense, or caste had not solidified in the area and at the time Asvaghosha lived and worked. Many scholars have noted that the stories of the lives and origins of these famous monks have a legendary quality and argue that in many cases several people of the same name are taken as one person.

Given all this, any generalisation about the 'social origin' of Buddhist monks or lay supporters becomes questionable. In regard to women, Mair notes that in China, where much more documentation is available and studies of the composition of the Buddhist community yield a more accurate picture, scholars 'are finding that it included a high proportion of widows, orphans and other types of individuals who did not fit in the usual pattern of social relationships' (Mair 1994: 720). There is little similar scholarship as yet in India. However sufficient evidence of the predominance of women

in the south can be found from inscriptions of the Satavahanas and their successors in Andhra which show a high proportion of women donors, from both commoner and royal families.

The distinction between monk-renouncers and householders, and the form of the relationship between them, also underwent changes. In the earliest period, frequent wandering and individual begging for food fostered a close relationship and a dependence on the laity. However as the local monasteries became richer, with more donations from royalty or the wealthy, connection with the poorer sections may gradually have weakened. By the time of the Satavahanas and Guptas, many of the local monasteries in northern and western India were surviving on land grants, though elsewhere, for example at Nagarjunakonda in Andhra, there is no evidence of land grants (Dutt 1988: 132). The reliance on land grants indicates not only support of the wealthy and of royalty, but also a less intimate connection with popular individual giving.

The distinction in early Buddhism between bhikkhus and lay followers seems to have gradually developed into a clearer separation with the consolidation of Theravada Buddhism. The goals of religious effort were distinguished, with a better rebirth taken as a goal for householders and *nibbana* as the goal for the monks. It then became a matter of 'good karma' to give great gifts or donations to the monasteries, while the dualism of teaching itself encouraged a rather watered-down version of the Dhamma for preaching to lay followers.

The monasteries themselves, or at least some of them, also became more luxurious. The Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang, who visited these monasteries in the 7th century, gives an evocative description:

> The sangharamas are constructed with extraordinary skill. A three-storied tower is erected at each of the four angles. The beams and the projecting heads are carved with great skill in different shapes. The doors, windows and low walls are painted profusely; the monks' cells are ornamental on the inside and plain on the outside. In the very middle of the building is the hall, high and wide. There are various storeyed chambers and turrets of different heights and shape, without any fixed rule... (Beal 1983: I, 74).

The scope for comfortable living in the Sangha may have become considerable, though this may have varied by region and by time.

It is quite likely that paintings similar to those at Ajanta were made in caves or on walls in monasteries elsewhere. While most commentators take the voluptuous court ladies depicted at Ajanta as indication that these were painted for lay visitors and traders, not for the monks themselves, there are still questions about sublimated sexuality in the Sangha.

As noted earlier, the Sangha provided food, clothing, shelter and medicine; this is described in several of the suttas, notably the *Pasadika Suttanta*. Though other samanas might accuse the bhikkhus of being 'addicted and devoted to a life of pleasure', (*Digha Nikaya* 3, 1921: 121–22), the purpose of assuring basic material requirements was to make possible a life of untroubled meditation and spiritual advance. Rejection of the asceticism of other samanas was not by itself an excuse for luxury. Nevertheless, unnecessary luxury in at least some cases may have come with the later development of the Sangha, funded as it was by royalty and rich merchants.

Gradually, *dana* or gifts came to be seen as the core of the relationship between the Sangha and lay followers. Donors who were rewarded with promises of a good birth in future lives financed the building of the great stupas, sculpture, caves and viharas. Gifts were increasingly expressed in terms of luxury goods. These were also mentioned in the Jatakas and known as the 'seven jewels', usually identified as gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal or quartz, pearl, red coral, and agate or coral (see Liu 1994: 93–94). These were crucial commodities in the trade between India and China, and so Liu argues that Buddhism played a major role not only in giving impetus to commerce, but also in influencing what was traded. The stress on gifts, however, represented a departure from seeing righteous behaviour as the major duty of householders; the famous *Sigalavada Suttanta* had made no mention of a proportion of income to be given in donations!

Finally, there was perhaps one more drawback of Buddhist monasticism. Although the early Buddhist Sangha was much more democratic in its functioning than other monastic traditions, it lacked the social service (or political) orientation of many Christian monastic orders. The Sangha had no 'orders' which could have furnished teachers, nurses or administrators and councillors with guidelines. Although much of Buddhist literature shows a tradition of kings as well as wealthy householders seeking the advice of

bhikkus and samanas about the affairs of their kingdoms, this was never developed into a collective and organised practice. One result was that when kings sought administrators, clerks and councillors from among the educated, they tended to turn to householding Brahmans, whose tradition did provide for 'services' to specific households.

The Three 'Ways' of Buddhism

At the level of doctrine, the main Buddhist forms are those of Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. There were radical differences among the three forms, but there were also significantly varied philosophical 'schools' within each.

Theravada Buddhism is usually taken as the early, classical form of Buddhism which consolidated itself after the death of the Buddha, in two major councils, the first at Rajgriha immediately after the *mahaparinibbana*, and the second 60–100 years later at Vaishali. The second council records a dispute over loosening the rules of the Bhikku Sangha. After this more splits and dissensions are recorded. The Mahasanghikas, who were later to develop into the Mahayana, trace a council held in Pataliputra in which there was dispute over the theses of a bhikku named Mahadeva; the orthodox then came to be called 'Theravada', taking the name from the term for 'elders' often used to refer to the most venerable bhikkus (Skilton 1994: 47–49). The dissenters gradually began calling themselves 'Mahayana' or the Great Vehicle to distinguish themselves from 'Hinayana (Theravada)', the Little Vehicle. Two important later councils were associated with the great Buddhist kings, one held under Asoka at Pataliputra around 250 BC, and one under Kanishka, when monks of the Theravada-associated Sarvastivadin school compiled their canon and codified their doctrine (ibid.: 55–57).

The first Mahayana sutras began to make their appearance as early as the 1st century BCE, though the term itself appears only from about the fourth century CE. Only about the 6th century is there epigraphic evidence for extensive lay patronage of a self-conscious 'Mahayana' movement (ibid.: 96). There were apparently regional specificities. In Maharashtra, for example, the cave evidence indicates that Theravada Buddhism was dominant in the early

period, i.e., up to 250 CE; then there is something of a lull and perhaps a decline after which the great Mahayana caves of Ajanta appear from the 5th century (about 450–600 CE). The caves at Ellora and Aurangabad contemporaneous with later Ajanta ones show Tantric influence (Gokhale 1976: 39, 84–91, 111–16). Nagarjuna, the famous philosopher of Mahayana, was born in eastern Maharashtra around the 2nd century, studied at Nalanda in Bihar and then settled in Andhra at Amravati or what is now called Nagarjunakonda. While there were strong links of trade in goods and ideas between these regions, the east on the whole, especially Bengal and Orissa, seems to have been more strongly the land of Vajrayana (Sahu 1958). It was here that Buddhism also survived the longest.

Mahayana may not have ever been really dominant in India. Taranatha, the Tibetan Buddhist chronicler who wrote in 1608, says that at the time of Nagarjuna (2nd century) most of the monks belonged to the Theravada school, and during the period of decline in the second half of the first millennium, the Theravada sanghas were greater in number and maintained their popularity among the people while Mahayana was dominant among 'the noble sections of the population consisting of the kings and others' (*Taranatha* 1990: 166, 256). Since Vajrayana was a secretive discipline, it is difficult to determine its spread—though the discovery of post-11th century Vajrayana murals, statues and caves in Ladakh, where monks had fled from Kashmir after a Shaivite restoration, indicates an impressive culture and exquisite art of Tantric inspiration (Mehra 1998: 64–67). There is no doubt that these forms of Buddhism were gaining in influence, but it seems that for a long period of time these three versions of Buddhism coexisted.

The Religion of the Elders

Theravada, the 'religion of the elders', by and large held on to the principles of early Buddhism that the Buddha was not a divine being, but a teacher of a Dhamma which all could follow, though this required fairly arduous discipline and a life style that was supportable primarily within the monastic life. Further, the acceptance of the karma/rebirth frame almost demarcated Theravada, distinguishing it from what we might call 'original Buddhism'.

By the early centuries of the Common Era, a proliferation of commentaries and literature had commenced, much of which involved the kind of philosophical speculation, analytical classification and even intellectual hairsplitting that the Buddha had originally condemned as adherence to *ditthi* or 'views'. As the monk-philosophers sought to elaborate and explain the Buddha's teachings within their versions of the karma/rebirth framework, certain contradictions developed that are apparent in the Theravada philosophical 'schools'. The term 'dhamma' was used in the Abhidhamma for the various types of existing entities or processes (presumably because these followed regularities or 'laws'), which were classified as mental as well as material. These began to be taken as a kind of ultimate reality. For example, the Sarvastivada school—the term came from 'all exists'—denied change, seeing time as a 'mode' of being; they thus saw the ultimate '*dhammas*' or entities as always existing. This meant seeing the Buddha as in some sense continuing to exist even after his *mahaparinibbana*. This school also stressed the systematisation of the *paticca samuppada,* chain of logic in a 'wheel of life in which 'twelve *nidanas*' or stages began with 'ignorance', in contrast to the earlier emphasis on thirst or craving as the beginning point—an idealistic metaphysics had replaced psychology. The Puggulavada school, which took its name from the term for 'person', argued that there was, if not a soul, an ultimately real thing that served as a substratum for continuity in rebirth.

These scholastic developments were a result of the original contradiction between the karma/rebirth frame and the denial of a soul. The belief in rebirth did in fact require some kind of entity to give continuity beyond one birth, linking the rewards or punishments earned in one with a future birth. As we have seen, the Jataka stories themselves implied such personalities. In this sense, the Abhidhamma philosophies only systematised notions already accepted in popular Buddhism.

This essentialism was criticised by another Theravada school, the Sautrantikas, those who 'based themselves on the Sutras.' The Sautrantikas (known now in Sanskrit), who derived their name from the fact that they limited themselves to the classical suttas (Sanskrit sutras) of the Pali canon, rejected the 'existence-ism' of the Sarvastivadins and the Puggalavadins, as well as Mahayana doctrines that had transformed the Buddha into a supreme, all-encompassing being. As Singh puts it, the Sautrantikas saw the

Buddha as a historical human being who showed the way to liberation and embodied wisdom and compassion; and he includes in their number the greatest logicians of India, Dinnaga (5th–6th century) and Dharmakirti (7th century) (Singh 1984: 84).

The Abhidhamma philosophies which came to constitute classical Theravada introduced another form of speculation that brought further contradictions. What was *nibbana*? According to at least some scholars, the earliest Buddhist thinking saw it as part of the world of contingency, and that it meant the elimination of craving (*tanhakkhaya*), a state of detachment, the end of suffering and a state of perfect happiness. This was, in Rhys Davids' words, 'an actual state, to be reached in this birth by ethical practice, contemplation and insight' (Burford 1991: 3–6). But the Abhidhamma school transformed *nibbana* into a transcendental, beyond the world state. This had two results. First, along with the acceptance and elaboration of the karma/rebirth framework, this meant that there were two radically distinct goals of human endeavour, one was liberation from the entire round of *samsara*, the other was to seek better rebirth within this round. These then became identified with the distinction between the Sangha and society as already noted.

At the same time, there was no clear way of reaching *nibbana* itself. Ethical practices, even extremely heroic ones, produced 'good' *kamma* that was nevertheless efficacious *kamma* and led to a good rebirth, but not to the transcendental *nibbana*. This we have also seen in the *Jatakas*: the heroic compassion of King Sibi, for instance, only resulted in a further birth; while the heroic giving of Prince Vessantara led to super mental powers. There was no way to specify how actions were related to the attainment of *nibbana*. In the end, the very transcendental character of *nibbana* so understood, coupled with the failure to define actions which would lead to it, left the way open for reformulations of the doctrine that included ideas of 'instant Enlightenment' along with the identification of the transcendental state with the world itself. Such transformations were brought about by Mahayana and consolidated in Vajrayana.

What Theravada teachings seemed to produce was a doctrine that encouraged ethical behaviour oriented to this-worldly ends for the majority of Buddhists, supporting a society of monks who devoted themselves to the other world. It was a simple and in many ways a healthy society, but it was also unsatisfactory in many ways. Much of the philosophical and theological speculation represented

a departure from the Buddha's teaching. Further, as the monasteries themselves became more bigger and were supported by land grants and gifts rather than direct contact with the world of householders, social morality may also have been blurred.

'Broadening the Way'

From the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada was a limited way, a 'little vehicle', one that was almost selfish. While on the one hand Mahayana saw the Buddha as a super, more-than-divine being, on the other it stressed compassion and the goal of liberation for all the souls in the world, which resulted in proliferation of Bodhisattvas who accumulated merit so that all could benefit from this. This assumed devotionalism and the concept of transfer of merit which was alien to the individualism of classical Buddhism.

Devotional Buddhism was part of the general development of bhakti in India, preceeding the well-known bhakti or 'Hindu' devotional movements centered around Krishna, or Shiva, or other gods. 'Bhakti' devotionalism meant throwing oneself on the 'grace' of a transcendent God, who was separate from the worshipper, to whom was given worship and love in exchange for grace. This was alien to both the early Brahmanic and the samana tradition, and to the early Dhamma which had emphasised self-control, not abandonment; righteousness, not propitiation of a god. 'Popular' religion itself is not necessarily devotional; it is often in fact very pragmatic, with believers performing their actions as a kind of 'bargaining' with the deity. Thus the emergence of bhakti was a radically new phenomenon.

Bhakti devotionalism seems to have developed in India around the same time as Christian devotionalism was developing in the Roman empire; it may have been a similar response to social changes and social structures that seemed to be unimaginably great and beyond individual control. But dates are confusing. Kosambi (1975) relates bhakti to what he calls 'feudalism from below' with devotion to a god being supported by the 'material relations' of loyalty/devotion to the feudal overlord; this is considered by both Kosambi and R.S. Sharma to have begun towards the end of the first millennium. At a more general level, it might be argued that devotionalism was a

natural response of a human being caught within a powerful social order that was based on clear social-economic exploitation with a powerful state, limited scope for mobility, and little foreseeable ability to being about change. Dependence on others rather than on individual achievement grew out of this situation; and provided a material basis for devotionalism.

With its bhakti element, Mahayana was a popular form of Buddhism. While the rich merchants and nobles who supported Mahayana could find themselves engaged in an 'exchange' relationship, benefiting from their economic support to monasteries and the visible symbols of Buddhism, the poor could turn to the Buddha, or the Bodhisattvas and other deities associated with the religion, for solace. Mahayana Buddhism was also associated with the incorporation of many indigenous deities who were taken as objects of worship in one form or another.

At a philosophical level, Mahayana doctrines had three major features.[3] First, there was an exaltation of the Buddha to an extent where the historical Gotama was lost, and the Buddha—along with Bodhisattvas and Buddhas of all kinds—became a cosmological and eternal figure above and beyond all gods, transcending all universes. Second, with this and with the idea of compassionate Bodhisattvas concerned with the salvation of all sentient beings, the concept of transfer of merit from the Buddha or Bodhisattva to the devotee became accepted. Third, the doctrines of Mahayana, especially that of *sunyata*, or the 'emptiness' of an absolute self or nature at the heart of all beings, once again stressed the transitory nature of human existence and the cosmos, and represented a response to the scholasticism of the Abhidhamma, as well as to the essentialism of Brahmanical teaching. At the same time, in spite of the idea of 'emptiness', there was a tendency in Mahayana to postulate an over-riding (or underlying) 'Being' identified with the Buddha-nature.

The transformation of ideas about the Buddha can be seen quite clearly in the literature. The early stories present him as a historical being, in dialogue with others, asking questions, debating, having doubts (for instance the initial one about how to teach the doctrine), experimenting with useless ways such as asceticism. The mode is

[3] However, see the works of David Kalupahana, for major reassessments of all of these developments.

realistic. However by the time the Pali canon was crystallised, it had to be added that when the Buddha asked questions, he was doing so even though he already knew the answers; the idea of omniscience was exerting its influence. Still, it was a clear belief of Theravada Buddhism that the Buddha himself had 'disappeared' for all practical purposes at his death. In the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* a stanza put in the mouth of Brahma says that all beings that have life shall lay aside what gives them individuality, 'even as the teacher—being such a one, unequalled among all the men that are, successor of the prophets of old time, mighty by wisdom and in insight clear, hath died,' while Sakka, the king of the gods, says, 'They're transient all, each being's parts and powers; growth is their nature, and decay. They are produced, they are dissolved again: and then is best, when they have sunk to rest.' The early sculptures, which show a blank spot where the Buddha would have sat, also show this sense of departure and absence. Even the Jataka stories, as has been noted, while treating the Bodhisattva as a marvellous, almost 'superhuman' figure, also saw his limitations and faults.

Much of the Pali texts seem to suggest that the Buddha was indeed a man who had become Enlightened. In others, he denies being a man or a god; due to his Enlightenment he has 'gone beyond' all these categorizations. Thus, while he sometimes refers to himself as a 'bhikkhu', a 'samana' and as a 'Brahman', he is more uniquely the 'Tathagata', a term which still puzzles translators. The whole of the Pali canon bears witness to the perfection, the unsurpassable and unique presence of the Buddha. However, though he is considered worthy of the utmost respect, he is meant to be emulated, not worshipped.

The Questions of Milinda represents a transitional phase: the Buddha, being gone, has no concern for the offerings of gifts but can feel the pain of a splinter which has nothing to do with karma—but he was in the process of becoming a superhuman being. Asvaghosha's *Buddhacarita* presents, in contrast, the picture of a hero who is no longer human, who knows no feelings, nothing of the *dukkha* which is said to be at the heart of existence. He is born without the pain of childbirth, with full consciousness; a near divine being, he flies in the air, walks on water, rains in the sky, shines like a sun. The historical being who achieved Enlightenment at a particular moment, before which he was only a man, was disappearing from popular consciousness.

With Mahayana, it began to vanish from doctrine as well. The notion of *lokottaravada*, the Buddha's existence beyond the material world, was put forward by the Mahasanghikas and formalised by the Yogacara school of Mahayana, beginning around the Gupta period, in the notion of the 'three bodies'. One which is also the most important, is the *sambhogakaya*, the pure body of enjoyment which is the Buddha in the celestial Pure Lands, the Buddha that teaches the Mahayana scriptures, the Buddha of visionary experience. The *nirmanakaya*, the historically existing Gotama, who could feel pain from a splinter, is only a projection of this; and finally, the *dharmakaya* which is the body of doctrine (Skilton 1994: 127–28). This teaching 'puts in its place' the Buddha of the Theravada, transforming him into a being above gods. It also downplays the role of the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis as men and women who could emulate the Buddha.

Sangharakshata quite succinctly brings out the essentialism implied in these developments:

> According to [the three bodies] doctrine, the Buddha is not merely a human being but Reality Itself. This Reality, being not only Wisdom but Compassion, for the purpose of preaching the Dharma to all beings assumes innumerable forms. These forms, of which Gautama Buddha is the one best known to us, are all identical with Reality and hence themselves wholly transcendental. Human birth and death are nothing but appearances. In reality the Buddha is never born and never dies. He never attains Enlightenment; for he is eternally enlightened, and in any case, according to the profoundest Mahayana teaching, Enlightenment is in the ultimate sense unattainable. His 'attainment' under the Bodhi-tree at Gaya was, like all the other events of his earthly career, merely a skillful device for the encouragement of the ignorant (Sangharakshata 1987: 278).

Thus earlier, more 'limited' Theravada teachings, indeed almost any doctrine of classical Buddhism, was transcended/denied by seeing these as a 'skilful' way of appealing to men and women with limited visions. This was in many ways an immense shift; and it is not too surprising that this Buddhist absolute could be identified with the Vedantic Brahma. Theravada Buddhist schools and scholars opposed this development staunchly, particularly the Sautrantikas with their opposition to 'added' scriptures and essentialism of all kinds, and their insistence that the Buddha was a great historical figure who

had showed the way to others. However, since Mahayana (and Vajrayana) had partly developed in reaction to the scholasticism of Theravada and its radical separation of *nibbana* and the world of births-and-deaths, an important social-philosophical base existed for a new version of Buddhism. Thus they could attract adherents and co-exist with Theravada for several centuries in India.

The development of the doctrine of Bodhisattvas filled with universal compassion and aiming at the liberation of all beings was also connected with the notion of the transfer of merit. Some kind of notion of transferring merit is essential for any saviour religion, and Mahayana thus appears as one of many saviour religions that was spreading throughout the world at that time, others being Christianity and Mithraism. Along with this arose the worship of other Buddhas—Manjusri, Avalokiteshwara, Amitabha. The 'transfer of merit,' and the shift towards seeing an eternal heaven as a goal almost equivalent to Nirvana, is seen in the Pure Land sect. However sinful a person may be, the uttering of the name of Amitabha at the time of death is sufficient for that person to be reborn into the Pure Land. This was no doubt an evidence of universal compassion, for Amitabha is depicted as a Buddha who had vowed rebirth and endurance of suffering again and again so that all beings should be able to attain liberation. At the same time, while Sukhavati (literally 'realm of bliss') is theologically said to be the ideal realm with conditions due to which Nirvana can be automatically attained (Skilton 1994: 104), it is presented in such a way as to make it almost a goal in itself.

Mahayana also seems to have introduced 'goddess' worship in Buddhism. Its leading philosopher, Nagarjuna, born in the Vidarbha region of what is now Maharashtra, trained at Nalanda in Bihar and said to have died in Andhra, was associated with the Satavahana kings of this region. According to Samuel Beal, writing on the basis of evidence from the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang, 'the worship of Durga was the central feature in the spirit of Nagarjuna's teaching [and] the fusion between Buddhism and the native worship of hill gods dates from Nagarjuna's time, and was brought about by his influence' (Beal 1983: II, 224n).

The ambiguity of the elements in Mahayana can be seen in a text called the *Srimalasimhanada Sutra*, 'The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala', which was a very popular early Mahayana text propagating the doctrine of the *tathagatagarbha*, the idea that there is a potentiality of Buddhahood in all sentient beings ('garbha' means

womb). An 'extreme' version of this would lead to essentialism and then to the Tantric notion of the identity of the world (*samsara*) and enlightenment (*nirvana*). The text also claims to present the *ekayana*, the 'one way' in which all the forms of Buddhism, Theravada, Mahayana, Varjayana, etc., are united—a kind of spiritual imperialism similar to later Hindu claims that all religions are one but that one is best expressed in Vedanta. At the same time, it is significant that this important and popular text is put in the mouth of a queen; this and the fact that it gives a role to daughters equally with sons of the family has led its translators to argue that it was written in the period of the matrilineal Iksvakus, whose queens and other royal ladies were the important donors financing the magnificent viharas, stupas and carvings of Nagarjunakonda and Amravati (Wayman 1974: 1; Stone 1994: 1–20). (The same considerations could link it with the Satavahanas themselves). Finally, the naming of the queen as Srimala (Pali 'Siri-mala') seems a reference to the most ancient popular goddess of India, Siri or Shri (Rhys Davids 1997: 217–21).

A major contribution of Mahayana was the emphasis on compassion that was involved with the figure of the Bodhisattva who rejected nirvana itself in order to save the world. This model of love and self-sacrifice had been expressed in all the Jataka stories of the heroic sacrifices of King Sibi, but the striking new image of the Bodhisattva ideal was tremendously powerful. For instance, Shantideva, an 8th century Mahayana monk, became known for writing, 'My own self and my pleasures, all my righteousness, past, present and future, I sacrifice without regard, in order to achieve the welfare of all beings.' However, his major work, the *Bodhicaryavatara*, from which this has been taken from, centered on a meditational method known the 'exchange of self and others' and many verses of this appear much more practical than is suggested by the extravagance of the famous quotation (Skilton 1994: 110; Feuerstein 2000).

The valuable aspect of Mahayana is that it involved, in a sense, a 'socialisation' of the original focus on individualism found in Theravada Buddhism. However, in treating this in terms of a transfer of merit that simply enabled other individual beings to achieve a liberation beyond the empirical world, Mahayana remained transcendental, and for this reason was probably less able than Theravada Buddhism to influence the development of Indian society.

Finally, the Buddha or 'Buddha-nature' and Nirvana seem to have been treated in such a way as to make them seem little different from the overriding 'Brahman' or supreme being of Vedanta.

The Diamond Path

Water in the ear is removed by more water, a thorn by another thorn. So wise men rid themselves of passion by yet more passion (Tantric saying)

Beyond the exalted heavens, jeweled palaces and diamond trees of Mahayana imagination lay another realm of joy—the human body. Sometime between 700–1000 CE, the influence of Tantra practices and beliefs, oriented to the magical and mystical aspects of the union of male and female, began to spread all over India. Tantric adepts were associated with secretive, esoteric philosophy; with rituals and arcane cosmologies; with worship of the mother Goddess; and with the ritual use of the forbidden 'five Ms'—*mamsa* (meat), *madhya* (alcohol), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (women) and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse).

Like other forms of Buddhism, Tantra has ambiguous elements. The association with sexuality is quite explicit in many Tantric texts, particularly the *Guhyasamaja-tantra* which describes elaborate rituals for group orgies. Many of the more 'shocking' aspects of these are argued to be symbolic by most followers of Tantra. (Another set of 'Ms', for example, includes instead *mantras* or chants, *mudras* or symbolic gestures and *mandalas* or symbolic diagrams of cosmic forces). Whatever the esoteric practices may have been, the role of gurus, rituals including the brahmanic *homa* or the fire ceremony, and the emphasis on the awesome and destructive as well as erotic aspects of existence in Tantric art and sculpture represent bewildering new forms of religious expression that seem very different in spirit from classical Buddhism (Bapat 1997: 313–27; Wayman 1995: 219–24).

A sociological view of Vajrayana could begin by noting that it was Buddhism in an age of Brahmanic 'Hindu' dominance. The last half of the millennium saw a hardening of caste and hierarchy, a proliferation of kingdoms, an elaboration or intensification of the agrarian economy with trade with the outside world to a large extent monopolised by the Muslim Arabs and others (see Chapter 5). This was very different from the open, mobile, trade-oriented

society of the earlier period. Tantra is very ancient. It is thought to have its roots in ancient fertility rites associated with early agriculture, where the human body was identified with the fecund cosmos and the union of male and female represented the union of earth and sky (rains) yielding fertility. Marxists such as Chattopadhyaya identify it with early materialism. However, why should such themes survive and even flourish in the later 'medieval' periods of Indian society unless there was something of a stagnation of production and social forms? Further, there was little that was 'materialistic' about the literate philosophies expressed in medieval Tantra. Vajrayana took off from the idealism of Mahayana Buddhism, while medieval Hindu Tantra had a philosophy of extreme idealism influenced by Vedanta (Bhattacharya 1996: 208–10).

Many Tantric practices can be taken as a revolt against caste, a rejection of the purity–pollution hierarchy which produced untouchability at the bottom and the supreme purity of Brahmans at the top. The 'shock value' produced by its practices and rituals may well have been salutary for those socialised into the values of Brahmanism. Tantric practioners were often low caste or identified themselves with low castes; the habits of the wandering *siddhas* ('perfected ones') of having low-caste consorts illustrates this (though it can also raise questions of gender exploitation). Tantra can also be seen as a revolt against a focus on monasticism in Theravada Buddhism. Indeed, the tradition of the wandering Tantric *siddhas* in many ways seemed to reflect the 'homeless' life of early Buddhism.

From a gender point of view, Tantra clearly is an effort to redress the rather puritannical attitude towards sex found in Theravada Buddhism.

Much of Tantra also preserved some of the scientific thrust of early Buddhism and materialistic doctrines. The medical tradition was preserved by Mahayana Buddhism even before Tantra; the Chinese traveller Hsuan Tsang records kings providing medical care as part of sponsored Buddhist programmes, and it was mainly through Mahayana that early medical exchanges took place with China, in which Nagarjuna was a leading figure (see Deshpande 2001). It has been argued that Tantra represented a kind of archaic science, similar to alchemy, and that many of the esoteric rituals were in fact chemical formulae. The fact that indigenous medicine in Tamil Nadu is known as Siddha medicine is striking. However,

proto-scientific activities in the period of Tantra lacked the institutional backing that could have led to a full-fledged scientific development in India as a whole.

At the doctrinal level, there were interesting transformations. The turn in Mahayana had been, with its emphasis on devotionalism, a cosmological proclamation of *sunyata*, the universal voidness or absence of self-subsisting essences and entities. Tantra made another turn, it identified *sunyata* with liberation itself. *Nirvana* and *sansara*, purity and pollution, sin and sinlessness, were all the same; difference was illusion. Thus, a famous text around the end of the 7th century declares that sexual practices can aid the attainment of liberation because the mystic must realise that the world is originally pure, unoriginated and immaculate (Basham 1958: 199).

Saraha, one of the famous Bengal *siddhas*, sang of mind as the origin of all things and of the identity of nirvana and samsara: 'Everything is Buddha without exception' (Basham 1958: 200). He celebrates the body, passion and indulgence, and critiques meditation:

> *I have visited in my wanderings shrines and other places of pilgrimage,*
> *but I have not seen another shrine blissful like my own body…*
> *Eat and drink, indulge the senses, fill the mandala again and again,*
> *by things like these you'll gain the world beyond.…*
> *'One fixes the eye, obstructs the thought, restrains the breath.*
> *That is the teaching of our lord and master.'*
> *But when the flow of his breath is quite motionless,*
> *And the Yogin is dead, what then?* (*Dohakosa* 1954: #48, 24, 66)

If meditation and stillness is death, then what? At the very least, this spirit of celebration shows a re-identification with the world of *samsara*, which earlier Buddhists had been enjoined to view with indifference.

Much of the poetry and writing of Tantra revolves around the paradoxical identifications of high and low, enlightenment with bondage, and the actually existing self with the 'perfect buddha' (see for instance Hess 1986: 158). These could easily lead to the denial of any need for morality, or any of the original Buddhist effort to discipline oneself in the aim of attaining enlightenment. If in extreme forms the disciple is enjoined to murder, to lie, to steal and commit adultery, this has implications even if it is immediately 'explained' away (ibid.: 141). There is a wide space of ambiguity

between shocking in order to awaken a person and actually endorsing questionable behaviour.

But with all of these problematic elements, Vajrayana maintained *prajna* or the understanding that would lead to liberation from the world of craving, sorrow and rebirth as it goal. This constitutes a crucial difference with 'Hindu' Tantra which focused on *shakti* or the acquisition of powers. The eradication of passion was still a goal, even if it was now to be attained through magical and conventionally 'impure' means. The continuing emphasis on compassion also indicated the specifically 'Buddhist' element.

What is Buddhism?

Returning to the question of the transformations of Buddhism, the difference between Vajrayana, Mahayana and Theravada may appear tremendous, and there are also huge differences of opinions about them. Devotees of one form may condemn the others, subtly or with polemical force. For instance, the Rhys Davids could see Mahayana and its doctrine of reliance on the Bodhisattvas as saviours as a weed-like growth covering up the early teachings of self-control and training that eventually lead to the downfall of Buddhism (introduction in *Digha Nikaya* II, 1941: 1), while in contrast, admirers like Sangharakshata could argue that Mahayana only brings out the glory of original Buddhism:

> The Mahayana emancipates Buddhism from its comparative drab terrestial and historical context and transfers it to a celestial context of dazzling beauty and irresistible emotional appeal; it mounts the priceless jewel of the Dharma in a ring of gold…Buddhism, though the offspring of the Eternal Truth and Law, had for some time to wear the coarse habiliments of its apparent place of origin; it was the Mahayana who wove for it the sumptuous robes befitting its true birth (Sangharakshata 1987: 207).

Strikingly it is the earlier one who appears more pragmatic, the latter more mystical and idealistic. In any case, such varying viewpoints could be duplicated almost anywhere, undoubtedly also among the earliest followers of the Buddha.

If there seem to be profound differences between the different 'ways' (*yana*) of Buddhism, it can also be argued that there are equally profound differences among texts and thinkers classified within each of the main traditions. For instance, the Sinhala-American philosopher David Kalupahana's latest work on Buddhist philosophy stresses the 'absolutism' of later commentaries on Pali texts (according to him, beginning specifically with Buddhaghosha in the 5th century) in contrast to what he calls 'early Buddhism'; at the same time he sees the earliest 'Mahayana' discourses such as the *Vajracchedika-prajnaparamita-sutra* and the great philosopher Nagarjuna as representing the genuine 'middle path' of Buddhism. In other words, the opposition between genuine Buddhism and an essentialist-absolutist interpretation does not coincide with the Theravada-Mahayana distinction but lies within each tradition. Kalupahana concludes with the argument that the bitterness arising between the two—with many Mahayanists describing Theravada as '*hin*' (low) and the Theravadists calling the Mahayanists 'heretics'—arises precisely because of ignoring the Buddha's injunction to avoid extreme attachment to 'views' (Kalupahana 1994: 237–39). Deep scholarly study of the Vajrayana tradition would undoubtedly also uncover vast differences among those professing it.

Finally, the question of whether there is an underlying 'Buddhism' common to all its historical forms can be answered in three major ways (see also Gombrich 1997: 6–7, 163–64). One is self-identification: those who call themselves Buddhists are Buddhists, whatever type they may be; no one outside the tradition has the right to deny this identification. Second, it can be said, as Gombrich does, in the line of *paticca samuppada*, that there is a historical though contingent connection: one grows out of another. And third, it can be argued that there are core characteristics, specifically the notion of compassion/ethics and the idea of the liberation from enslavement to passions as the goal.[4] It might be appropriate, then, to conclude with Gombrich's own argument about Vajrayana:

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[4] It might also be noted that there is a 'negative' aspect to this: that notions of karma/rebirth appear almost throughout, in Pali texts and in later texts classified as Mahayana, for instance the popular 'letters to a friend' attributed to Nagarjuna (*Suhrllekha* 1996). Whether or not karma/rebirth is a core concept will be taken up in the conclusion.

> Buddhism was massively invaded by tantra, and the Vajrayana tradition was born. Both in depending on the practitioner's identification with gods/demons…and in drawing power from impurity, Buddhist tantra is paradoxical Buddhism and has turned the tradition on its head…. But it has been recolonised by Buddhist ethics: its purposes are never immoral, but the allegorical dramas enacted in Buddhist ritual and visualised by its practitioners always witness the triumph of good over evil, and are interpreted as leading to Enlightenment. In other words, what makes the Vajrayana Buddhist is its ethics (Gombrich 1997: 163–64).

4

Buddhist Civilisation

The Forgotten Past

The sense of history in India has always been a tenuous one. Today the government in power sponsors programmes hailing the Sanskritic, Vedic past, while 'Hindutva' intellectuals depict Indian history as a seamless thread, originated by peoples who built both the Indus civilisation and Vedic culture, and flowing from there until today. Their primary opponents describe India as a tolerant, multicultural society whose tolerance is also thought to flow from the same roots and whose 'national' unity was built mainly during the colonial period. In both cases the sense of the past dates mainly from the 19th century.

Historiographical traditions of the dominant Brahmanic culture have always been weak, built as they were on legends and linked to myths. The sense of the 'Aryans' as a people itself comes from 19th century Orientalism. The Vedas were propagated as a symbol of wisdom for thousands of years, but were little known to the people. Asoka's empire, the greatest in extent before British colonial rule, remained forgotten in India until the British discovered the various Asokan inscriptions on pillars and stones throughout the country and linked the 'Devanampiya Piyadasi' of these with the 'Asoka' of the Ceylonese Buddhist chronicles. The Indus civilisation was not known until the discovery of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa in the 1920s. The earliest empire south of the Vindhyas, that of the Satavahanas, remained unknown in Maharashtra at the time of the 'rise of the Marathas' and means little to people today. While India uses a traditional dating from the Saka era (beginning 78 CE), there is little popular consciousness of what this refers to and few associate it with the historically most viable candidate, the Kusana king Kanishka.

India has been a great civilisation, but the interpretation of this civilisation has been unusually contested. The British period instituted both the 'Aryan myth' and the 'Hindu myth', with the traditional European classifications of ancient, feudal and modern periods being interpreted as 'Hindu India'. 'Muslim India' and 'British India'. Indian historians have disputed this, but continue to define their past as a largely 'Hindu' one. Buddhism has been taken as subsidiary, basically a form of Hinduism that became uninfluential after Asoka.

The contemporary construction of the 'Hindu' past also interprets caste in this light. While the Vedic peoples are seen as having no caste, the roots of varna are nevertheless seen in the Brahman, the warrior or *rajanya*, and the common people or *vis* of the Vedic tribes. These, it is thought, expanded quite naturally into Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya, with the various absorbed tribal groups and peoples proliferating to become jatis under the new category of Shudra. There is little mention of any struggle or conflict being involved in this process, since most of the historians of India have in general agreed on the collectivist aspects of caste.

These issues will be taken up in this chapter. In regard to India's past, we will argue that the decisive period for the formation of the continuous 'thread' of history was the first millennium BCE, and that to a very large degree the thousand years after this represent a civilisation dominated by Buddhism: ancient India was not 'Hindu India' but 'Buddhist India'. Second, historicising caste, we will show that the system of *varnashrama dharma* had its beginnings about the same time, but it came to dominate only with the triumph of Brahmanism. Finally, we will examine aspects of the civilisation that Buddhism encouraged and conclude with a discussion of the relationship between religion and economic growth.

Buddhist India

Was ancient India 'Hindu' or Buddhist?

Art and architecture testify that it was overwhelmingly Buddhist for over a millennium. The earliest religious architecture is Buddhist—vihars, stupas, caves including caitya halls and monasteries, statues. There is no Hindu temple until the time of the Guptas, and even these were small. Even in the period of the Guptas, considered to be the classical Hindu kings, the most magnificent architecture that

was found was the stupa and carvings at Sanchi, the construction of which began earlier but was completed during their rule. Similar claims can be made for literature. Brahmanic religious literature of course is available from this period: the Upanishads, the Dharmasashtras, the *Arthasashtra* and others of its type. The epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* took their final form in the 1st centuries CE. Pali Buddhist literature from this period (though surviving only outside of India) is much greater in extent. Further, much of the earliest Sanskrit literature was Buddhist (that of Asvaghosha and early Mahayana); and even other literature is either secular or Buddhist-influenced, for example the Tamil Sangam period and *kavya* literature, covering the period up to the 6th century and the Maharashtri Prakrit *Gathasattasati*, and so forth.

Politically, the evidence indicates a strong Buddhist predominance almost everywhere in the subcontinent. The identification of kings as 'Buddhist' or 'Hindu' is somewhat problematic. Apart from Asoka, no ruler was clearly Buddhist, and most patronised all religions. Brahmans continued to provide councillors and ministers for all kings but, as Buddhist literature itself shows, Brahmans were not necessarily supporters of 'Brahmanism', that is of *varnashrama dharma* and the Vedas, and all those who were called 'Brahmans' were not necessarily Brahmans by caste. With this in mind, we can make the following religious–political survey:

The early *gana-sanghas* cannot be described as either 'Buddhist' or 'Hindu', though they were most influenced by the samana tradition in general. The rising monarchies had strong connections with Buddhism. The early kings of Kosala and Magadha, Pasanedi and Bimbisara, were Buddhist sympathisers, and even the parricide son of Bimbisara, Ajatasattu, conqueror of the Vajjian *gana-sangha* confederacy, was claimed by the Buddhists as a sympathiser, though sources also describe him as being influenced by Devadatta (leader of another samana cult and a major 'villain' in the Buddhist tradition). Chandragupta Maurya, who acceded to the throne in 321 BC following the invasion of Alexander the Great, and initiated the rise of Magadha to supreme power; is supposed to have become a Jain and renounced the throne (Keay 2001: 83–86). Strikingly, Magadha was considered by Brahmanic literature to be a *mlechha* (barbarian) land where Vedic sacrifices and Brahmanic rituals were not performed.

Chandragupta's grandson Asoka, whose reign is dated from 272 to 232 BC, ruled over the largest empire known in India up to the

time of the British. His inscriptions announce him as a Buddhist; and while most Indian historians, including Romila Thapar and D.D. Kosambi, argue that the 'Dhamma' he tried to promote as the ethics of his kingdom had nothing specifically Buddhist about it, it was in fact basically the code of righteousness that Buddhism prescribed for 'cakkavati' kings. His instructions on his rock edicts not only enjoined 'morality' in general, they expressly renounced the slaughter of nearly all animals for royal feasts. Though he maintained capital punishment (not itself against the Buddhist ideal), prisoners were regularly released from jail. Asoka's pillars are the most important early architectural remains, and the wheel pillar itself proclaims that he saw himself as a Buddhist emperor (see Thapar 1982; Smith 1998; Kosambi 1975: 197–209).

The Mauryan empire began to decline soon after Asoka and ended with the revolt of a Brahman governor, Pushyamitra Shunga, which Ambedkar has called a 'counter-revolution'; Pushyamitra sought to revive Vedic sacrifices and Ambedkar believes that the *Manusmriti* was written during his rule (Ambedkar 1987: 268–70). But while the Mauryan empire broke up and a period of reaction began in the Gangetic plain of Bihar and eastern UP, agricultural and surplus-producing urbanised societies expanded in the south, west and eastern regions of India, and new Buddhist and Jain-influenced kingdoms outside the original Gangetic plain center of Buddhism.

In the east, the Kalinga that Asoka had once conquered produced Kharavela, its first great ruler a Jain king who promoted agriculture and irrigation works there, and himself embarked on a career of conquest in the 1st century BCE. From this time on for a millennium, eastern India including Orissa and Bengal remained an area of Buddhist influence and the major but of trade with southeast Asia.

Asoka had identified four kingdoms to his south—the Pandyas, Satyaputtas, Cholas and Keralaputtas. Three of these were the traditional Tamil kings, Pandyas, Cholas and Cheras. These kingdoms date from the last centuries of the first millennium BCE, when surplus production allowed the formation of kingdoms in the south and the beginnings of trade. Basham has noted the presence of a Pandya envoy in Athens in 20 BCE (Basham 1959: 228). The Sangam period, lasting probably from the 1st to 3rd centuries CE, was a period of epic poetry that showed influence of Buddhism and Jainism as well as Vedic Brahmanism. The earliest Tamil inscriptions in the Brahmi script, from about the 2nd century BCE, record gifts to

Jains and Buddhists (Sastri 1999: 80–81). The tradition of righteous, self-sacrificing kings in Tamil Nadu dates to the Sangam era (the legend of King Sibi, so important in Buddhist Jataka tales, may well have originated in the south) and the symbolism of the *cakkavatti*, whose march of victory 'was led by the march of a mysterious wheel of gold and gems through the air' (Sastri 1999: 119) may also have indicated a Buddhist influence. The fact that Cholas and Dravidas were both named as low, 'mixed' castes by orthodox law-givers like Manu also indicates the limit of Brahmanic influence.

After the Sangam period, what Nilakanta Sastri calls a 'long historical night' prevailed, from the 4th to the end of the 6th century, dominated politically by 'a mysterious and ubiquitous enemy of civilisation, the evil rulers called Kalabhras' (Sastri 1999: 130). Yet this 'dark period' of Tamil history seemed so only to the 19th and 20th century historians who created and defined their history—before the British period, all earlier periods were equally known or unknown to the general population. The 'nationalist' historians of the British period considered it a dark age only because the rulers were supporters of non-Brahmanic religions: it was the period of great literature, the *kavyas* and the great didactic poem *Kural*, all influenced by or openly propagating Buddhism and Jainism. The 'Hinduisation' of Tamil Nadu took place only after the Brahmanic revival under the Pallavas in the 7th century. This period saw the rise of militant bhakti movements focused on Shiva and Vishnu strong anti-Buddhist and anti-Jain propaganda, as well as the sophisticated campaigns of the Vedantic philosopher Shankacharya in the 8th century CE.

The 'Satyaputtas' may be identified as a branch of the Asoka family in Maharashtra which eventually became the Satavahanas, and who ruled perhaps the greatest empire after Asoka (Kosambi 1975: 213–14). Though they are called the 'Andhras' in Sanskritic puranic literature, they evidently originated from western Maharashtra, with the earliest inscriptions referring to them dating from about the 1st century BCE.[1] Then they were eclipsed in that region after being defeated by the Sakas, central Asian tribes who

[1] In fact, the Dravidian speakers who must have been dominant in the area at the time probably only later gave birth to separate Telugu and Kannada literatures, while Marathi arose out of the mixture of these with some Pali (Prakrit) and later Sanskrit influences.

drove through northwest India, went east, and rose again under Gotamiputa Satakani (Gautamiputra Satkarni) in the 1st half of the 2nd century. At the height of their power they ruled much of Maharashtra, Andhra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Their inscriptions and those of their successors were in Prakrit with Brahmi script. The metronymic was used both for rulers and others in their territory as can be seen in inscriptions recording donations, which also indicated a matrilineal and probably tribal tradition. Kosambi considers them to have been originally an indigenous tribe, with the name Sadakani deriving from the Austro-Asiatic word for 'horse'. The first major inscription, and also the largest statue, is that of a queen Nayanika, who may even have been a ruling queen given the inscriptional and coin evidence (Mirashi 1981: II: 5–20). Later inscriptions also show an important role of queens, perhaps by that time as 'queen-mothers'. It is quite possible that matriliny was a major practice and, as with the early Egyptians, the earliest kings may have claimed the throne through 'marrying' sisters.[2] After Nayanika's early inscription recording a number of Vedic sacrifices and gifts to Brahmans (this may have been the time of Pushyamitra), all others record donations to Buddhist monasteries, either by assistance in the excavation of caves or the donation of villages.

The great monastic caves, inscriptions and carvings in the Western Ghats reveal the mercantile nature of the Satavahana society; the caves marked trade routes and show both the link with Rome and a local monetised economy. The donors, shown through their signatures or occasionally in statues, are a remarkable group. They include foreigners (Greeks), bankers, wealthy merchants, and also a perfume-vendor, a carpenter, braziers, a blacksmith, flower-vendors, ploughmen and householder-farmers. (In contrast, the monuments sponsored by the northern Kushanas at about the same time had many more kings and nobles). Many women were shown making or sharing in donations, including nuns (who thus apparently held property!). Often the craftsmen were organised in powerful guilds, which themselves made donations, took money on interest and entered into other financial agreements with rulers. The carvings,

[2] The Jatakas record a Rama legend in which Sita is the sister of 'Rama-pandit' and 'Lakkana' and later becomes co-queen with them (# 461, *Jatakas* Volume 4, 1985: 79–86).

like the later Ajanta cave paintings, show voluptuous women, towering superhuman Bodhisattvas and delicate court scenes, indicating a pleasure-loving society. Kosambi believes that the Jatakas, though referring back to events in Kosala and Magadha of the Buddha's time, actually depict this society, and he contrasts it to the narrow-minded Brahmanic ritualism making its recovery in the north and described in the *Manusmriti* (Kosambi 1975: 268–71, 277). The Sanskrit play *Mrcchakatika,* or 'Little Clay Cart', showing the love of a Brahman householder for a courtesan with her own well-to-do household, and climaxing in a peasant uprising and change of dynasty, was written in Satavahana territory, and the great Buddhist philosopher–physician Nagarjuna was associated with the Satavahana kings. All in all, it was an open society in spite of the occasional claim of a king to 'prevent the mixture of varnas' and it was a society under the hegemony of Buddhism.

In north India, while the central Asian incursions which were coming in waves around opponents of the Satavahanas, new and prosperous empires such as that of the Kushanas (between 1st to 3rd centuries CE) were coming up. The Kushana empire was not simply an 'Indian' one but a world empire including most of northern India and much of central Asia. Kanishka, its most famous ruler, was a patron of Buddhism; it is probably his rule which marks the beginning of the Saka era (78 CE). Trade links with China through central Asia were strong at the time. There was a flourishing urban culture west of the original Magadha empire, and Buddhism remained the dominant religion. The reign of Kanishka also marks the changes that were taking place in Buddhism; the council that marked the beginning of Mahayana Buddhism was supposed to have been held under him. It was during his time that the first recorded Buddhist missionaries, Dharmaraksha and Kasyapa Matanga, left for China in 65 CE, departing from Taxila and climbing up 'through the awesome Indus gorge', going through difficult terrain that is heavily marked by remains of stupas and records of Kushana rulers, and finally, after a 'spectacular climb up the glaciers', coming to Tashkurgan in what is now China. This is what is now called the Karakoram route in the part of Kashmir currently under Pakistani control which when in the late 1970s Pakistani and Chinese engineers began work on the highway was described as 'the eighth wonder of the world' as a road passed through heavily mountainous and high land (Keay 2001: 111–17).

The name Kasyapa Matanga indicates an association both with Kashmir, for long a center of Buddhism, and with the semi-legendary Candala hero Matanga.

The Guptas (c. 320–547 CE) are considered to be one of the major dynasties of ancient India, ranking along with the Mauryas (Keay 2001: xxii–xxiii, 129–54). Kosambi, though, mocks the treatment of the Gupta era as the 'classical age' of ancient India, noting there was little memory of them even in Brahmanical records; rather, their importance was a creation of nationalist historians looking for an unambiguous force of early 'Hindu' glory to counter British denigration: 'Far from the Guptas reviving nationalism, it was nationalism that revived the Guptas' (Kosambi 1975: 313). Though they promoted Brahmanism, including the revival of sacrifice, the Guptas were themselves considered low by Brahmanic texts. Their first emperor was proud to have married a Licchavi princess though the Licchavis by that time were considered worse than Shudras by the Brahmans; and they patronised Buddhism as well. The great stupa and carvings at Sanchi, architecturally more important than any Hindu temple of the period, were completed under their rule. Clearly Buddhism remained strong within their realm. As the Chinese travellers' accounts show, with Harsha in the early 7th century, a king could again be characterised as Buddhist, though he issued coins depicting Shiva as well as the Buddha.

This survey indicates that the early, classical age of India was as much, if not more, a Buddhist era as a 'Hindu' era. The widespread tendency among Indian historians to carry forward the old British division of 'Hindu India, Muslim India and British India' into a 'ancient, feudal and modern' period, still takes for granted that 'ancient India' is basically 'Hindu India'. This has to be rejected. Similarly, the idea that 'Hinduism' is the oldest religion of India and perhaps of the world, with a 5000 year old history, originating in the Vedic period and undergoing development and modification up to the present, is wrong. The framework within which Buddhism and Jainism are both treated as reactions to a Hinduism/Brahmanism which maintains essential features throughout (so that even a sensitive historian like Romila Thapar can refer to the tradition linking itself with the Vedas as 'orthodoxy' while the other, shramanic traditions are 'heterodoxy') has to be rejected. Ancient India was Buddhist India. 'Hinduism' had its beginnings at

the end of the first millennium BCE with the adoption of the Bhagwata cult (Vaishnavism) and the absorption of the Shaiva cult (known for a long time as the 'Pashupatis') while the Dharmasastras (for example, *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra*) were 'manifestos'[3] for the type of society Brahmanism sought to bring into being. But Brahmanism was not the determining force in Indian society. For a millennium after the time of Buddha, his Dhamma remained the major determinant of Indian civilisation, though in conflict throughout with the *varnashrama dharma* of a developing Brahmanism which it opposed. Buddhism was able to create a flourishing art and architecture, and to temper the individualism of the commercial, open-class society with concern for others and a disciplined life, and thus fostered a dynamic, economically growing and open society.

Caste and History

But what of caste? As the sociologist G. Aloysius reminds us, it has to be considered non-deterministically and in its historical–geographical context:

> First of all, varna-caste is primarily recognised as one kind of social formation in a single type of eco-zone—the riverine valleys of the sub-continent. Second, even here, the social formation in the primary Ganga-valley was not only bifurcated but of mutually antagonistic nature [the state forms and the *gana-sanghas*]; in other words the very origin of caste-varna in the subcontinent was tension-ridden and contained the seeds of its own negation, flagging off the very real possibility of historical development along either course—caste or non/anti-caste. Third, the apparent submergence and collapse of the relatively secular-flexible stratification of the gana-sanghas under the pressure of monarchy and its rigid-religious varna hierarchy was not a matter…of natural or internal evolution, but a result of historical confrontation and the vanquishing of one social formation by the other, after much contestation and resistance.…Fourth, the ritually-legitimated varna hierarchy…in its movement of conquest and encompassment had become merely a cognitive ideal, with its actualisation

[3] I owe this felicitous term to Dhanaji Gurav (personal communication, 18 August 2001).

> limited to and dependent upon actual power wielded on the ground....' (Aloysius 1999: 157–58).

This is to say that caste was neither eternal, nor an inevitable, essential feature of Indian society. It is in history, not above it. But, how and why did it develop? What was the process?

There have been many theories of the origin and dominance of the caste system; we can learn something from most of them, while accepting none in full. The 'economic explanation' has been perhaps the most influential. At its simplest, this looks at caste as a form of division of labour, in which the varnas represent 'closed castes'. By itself this is inadequate since it does not explain the extreme fragmentation and separation of jatis doing similar occupations; as Ambedkar had many times noted, 'caste is not a division of labour, but a division of labourers.'

In a more sophisticated economic explanation, caste is seen as evolving at the time of the emergence of agrarian society and surplus production. According to this, the earlier hunting-gathering and simple horticultural tribes were transformed into functional groups in a complex, inequalitarian agricultural society. (As the anthropologist Robert Redfield put it, 'caste is a tribal society re-arranged to fit a civilisation'). In this process, originally independent endogamous groups were as integrated as jatis, which continued to have internal lineage and clan structures, but which took up different occupations and became identified with various functions. Each thus had a separate rank and status (however disputed) in a hierarchy headed by non-producing intellectual-priests (Brahmans) and rulers (Kshatriyas), who shared control over the basic means of production, the land. Kosambi, the most sophisticated exponent of this approach, claims the power of Brahmans resulted from their technical and intellectual skills (knowledge of the seasons) which aided in agriculture, and sees them as pioneers in the spread of agriculture (Kosambi 1975: 26–50).

Caste can indeed by seen as one way of organising labour, of dealing with hierarchy and the state in an economy of surplus production. But even the sophisticated economic theory does not explain just why this should have taken place in a caste-hierarchical form in South Asia and not in the rest of the world. Morton Klass, an anthropologist, tries to fill this gap by arguing that the reason lies in certain characteristics of pre-existing tribal societies in India;

specifically because they were characterised primarily by egalitarian clans they could not internally differentiate to allow the hierarchy inevitable with the emergence of surplus production in agriculture; instead the egalitarian tribe got absorbed as a jati with internal equality but externally partaking of rank in a hierarchy (Klass 1980: 135–59). It is unclear whether this would put the emergence of the caste system at the time of the Indus civilisation or in the first millennium BCE. In a sense, it only pushes the problem further back and leaves us with the question of why such unique tribal societies existed in India. It also seems clear that this was not true of all the tribes that were absorbed as castes; some, like the Maratha-Kunbis of Maharashtra, clearly have had internal hierarchical rankings. It would make more sense to take Klass' thesis as showing alternative possibilities of development, and ask what factors (including ideological and political ones) gave thrust to the jati form.

In India itself, the most widespread 'popular' interpretation is the racial theory, which becomes the 'Aryan theory' when applied to India. This was originally put forward by European scholars, who noted the links between Sanskritic languages and European languages and viewed the higher varnas in India as having descended from Indo-Europeans, and the lower ones from conquered indigenous people. These theorists therefore view the caste system as a means of subordinating a conquered population, fueled by the desire to maintain purity of lineage and horror of sexual intermingling with an inferior group. The Aryans are seen as the instigators. The top three varnas (Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya) are descended from the priests, the nobility and the common people of the Vedic tribes, while the Shudras and others are descended from the conquered indigenous peoples. Colour differences marked this division. Varnas served to explain and 'place' the innumerable tribes or local communities, which later became jatis, in the framework of the overall system.

The racial theory became popular with the early non-Brahman and Dalit movements. Nevertheless, there are many problems with it. The same objection applies here as to an economic explanation: just as division of labour (but not caste) arose everywhere in the world, so situations of conquest and subordination between ethnic groups have existed throughout history without giving rise to caste. All of these have been accompanied by some notions of racial superiority and injunctions against intermarriage, with conquered

groups considered 'naturally' inferior—and in all cases, such injunctions have been broken. They were broken in India, where all available evidence shows quite a fair amount of actual mixing between groups by the first millennium BCE. Those groups at that time considered 'untouchable' or polluting, such as the Candalas, were rarely described as dark-skinned, though other epithets were used. The Buddhists who used the term 'Aryan' in the sense of 'noble' and not in any racial sense, were reflecting the social reality, while the Brahmans who proclaimed 'birth' as decisive were ignoring the degree to which people of low or questionable birth were absorbed into Brahman lineages.

One of the most influential theories has been that of Louis Dumont, the French sociologist, who stressed that caste is a religious-ideological phenomenon, based on hierarchy and linked to purity–pollution. The Brahman, as ultra-pure, is posed against the untouchable, the symbol of drastic impurity (Dumont 1998: 33–49). Dumont's approach is often criticised as idealistic, but in many ways the greatest scholar arising from untouchables themselves, Dr Ambedkar, agrees with him: caste is inextricably linked to its religious justification; it is an outcome of 'Hinduism'. Ambedkar views caste as a creation of Brahmans, and in his 1916 essay on caste, he sees the Brahmans as the first to constitute themselves as a varna-caste, the ones who defined other castes, and in the end succeeded in making the varna system a social reality (Ambedkar 1979: 15). This became possible, of course, because caste had its functions in an emerging agrarian society, and also because Brahmans could make the necessary alliance with kings and power holders to impose it—but the ideology, the religion, was essential for caste.

Ambedkar's point fills in an essential missing piece of the puzzle. It allows us to identify just when the process took place. Caste did not emerge with the first agrarian societies; in fact there was a fairly long period and many regions in which fairly sophisticated agrarian production existed without significant reliance on caste as such.[4] Caste also did not emerge with the Aryan 'conquest' and was not linked in a direct line to Vedic social structure—except that

[4] That is, the early Indus civilisation, the *gana-sanghas*, probably the early western India system under the Satavahanas, Tamil Nadu and other southern regions up until the 6–7th century CE.

the Brahmans who propagated castes themselves made such a link and erected the Vedas into holy scriptures. Dumont himself identifies the time of Manu as the decisive period, with roots going back to the 8th century BCE (Dumont 1998: 37, 52–53); but this only points to the beginnings of Brahmanical theorising of caste. We have to see as Aloysius does, most of the first millennium BCE as an era of contestation in which theorists of Brahmanism were elaborating caste; it is however a period when caste as a social structure had not become a reality.

An interesting example of this contestation is given in a long and probably late Jataka. Here the Nagas, very likely lineage-based 'tribal' societies undergoing transformations that led to class division and political formation, are depicted as being split on the issue of acceptance of caste ideology. According to the story, the king of Banaras (himself born of a Naga mother) is forced to give his daughter to a Naga king; they have four sons. One of which is the Bodhisattva, who is captured by a wicked Brahman, tormented, eventually released, and then debates with a brother who is praising Brahmanism in the Naga kingdom itself. The brother praises the Vedic way:

> *The Veda and the sacrifice, things of high worth and dignity,*
> *belong to Brahmans as their right, however worthless they be....*
> *Brahmans he made for study; for command*
> *he made the Khattiyas; Vessas plough the land;*
> *Suddas he servants made to obey the rest;*
> *thus from the first went forth the Lord's behest* (#543).

Upon this the Bodhisattva refutes this position, in a long critique of the Vedas, sacrifice, and castes:

> *These Veda studies are the wise man's toils,*
> *the lure which tempts the victims whom he spoils...*
> *Doctrines and rules of their own, absurd and vain,*
> *our sires imagined wealth and power to gain;*
> *'Brahmans he made for study, for command*
> *he made the Khattiyas; Vessas plough the land;*
> *Suddas he servants made to obey the rest;*
> *thus from the first went forth his high behest...'*
> *We see these rules enforced before our eyes,*
> *none but the brahmans offer sacrifice,*

> *none but the Khattiya exercises sway,*
> *The Vessas plough, the Suddas must obey.*
> *These greedy liars propagate deceit,*
> *and fools believe the fictions they repeat;*
> *he who has eyes can see the sickening sight:*
> *why does not Brahma set his creatures right? …*
> *At first there were no women and no men;*
> *'twas mind first brought mankind to light,—and then,*
> *though they all started equal in the race,*
> *their various failures made them soon change place;*
> *it was no lack of merit in the past,*
> *but present faults which made them first or last.*
> *A clever low-caste lad would use his wit,*
> *and read the hymns nor find his head-piece split….*
> *The Brahman's Veda, Khattiya's policy,*
> *both arbitrary and delusive be,*
> *they blindly grope their way along a road*
> *by some huge inundation overflowed* (#543).

'We see these rules enforced before our eyes': the Vedas, the sacrifice, and the theory of the varnas are all attacked here, but it seems to be a context in which they are penetrating the society and being imposed.

Dumont's argument that the ultra-pure, the Brahman, requires dialectically a symbol of ultra-impurity, the untouchable, is also reflected in the Buddhist literature, especially in stories about the Candalas, the archetypal untouchables. What was the origin of the Candalas? They are mentioned occasionally in the Upanishads, as early as the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, but the Jatakas featuring Candalas are said to be later ones, and the first recorded mention of them by an outside observer is by the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hsien, who visited India in the early 5th century, and apparently toured Gupta territory (Beal 1983: I, xxxviii). They are described as conquered hunting-gathering tribes who have their own villages (not just settlements outside villages and towns), and their own dialect or language.

Matanga, who seems to have been a famous hero-leader of the Candalas, is in direct conflict with Brahmans. In the *Matanga-Jataka* (#497) he kidnaps a wife from a rich merchant family, becomes an ascetic to win renown and powers, then humbles his son who has become dissolute, then resolves to humble another proud Brahman and finally humbles the 'sixteen thousand Brahmans' who have misled his son; he is killed by a king but the kingdom is destroyed in revenge by the angry gods:

So the whole nation was destroyed of Mejjha, as they say;
for glorious Matanga's death, the kingdom swept away.

This may be the record, in distorted form, of a considerable battle. Matanga, may in fact have been a 'standard' name for well-known Candalas or untouchables. Besides the Kashyapa Matanga who was a Buddhist missionary in the 1st century, Taranatha records a Matangi-pa said to have been a disciple of Nagarjuna, as well as another person who became a Tantric siddha (*Taranatha* 1990: 137, 139n, 272–73).

It is also significant that while Brahmans and many rich householders are depicted as horrified of being polluted, this is not true of everyone. For example, the man who learns a charm from the Candala guru is willing to submit to demeaning service to get it (#474), and a king who is told by a 'pariah' that it is not proper to sit higher than a Brahman ascetic-teacher, praises him and says that if the man had been high-caste he would have given him the kingdom, but since he is 'low' he could be king by night only (#309). A high degree of antagonism between Brahmans and Candalas is shown in a story where Sariputta, perhaps the most esteemed bhikku of the Buddha's time, takes birth as a Candala (#377). A haughty Brahman student encounters him with horror:

> *He feared the wind after striking the candala's body might touch his own body, so he cried, 'Curse you, you ill-omened candala, get to leeward,' and went quickly to windward, but the candala was too quick for him and stood to windward of him. Then he abused and reviled him the more…The candala asked him, 'Who are you?' 'I am a brahman student.' 'Very well, if you are, you will be able to answer me a question…If you can't, I will put you between my feet.' The brahman, feeling confident, said, 'Proceed.' 'The candala asked…'Young brahmin, what are the quarters?' 'The quarters are four, the East and the rest.' The candala said, 'I am not asking about that kind of quarter; and you, ignorant even of this, loathe the wind that has struck my body,' so he took him by the shoulder and forcing him down put him between his feet (#377).*

When the whole story is told to the teacher (the Bodhisattva), he admonishes the Brahman student for getting angry. Here the Candala represents an esoteric learning. More important, with the antagonism between untouchables and Brahmans, the Candalas are shown as resisting their untouchability—in contrast to later

bhakti movements where in Brahman-recorded traditions, untouchables are seen as humbly accepting their position.

In analysing the varna-jati situation at the time of the rise of Buddhism, Uma Chakravarty makes an important point. She points out that the Pali texts refer to the four-varna system only in the abstract: no real person is ever identified as being of any specific varna, or even with any of the more frequently mentioned categories of *hina kulas* (low-families): (Chakravarty 1996: 104–07).

> In the Brahmanical texts the *vessa* is associated with agriculture, cattle-keeping and trade, and the *sudda* with service. But nowhere in the Buddhist texts are people or groups occupied with agriculture, cattle-keeping or trade referred to as *vessas*, or those associated with service referred to as *suddas*. Instead, the Buddhist texts associate agriculture with the *gahapati*, the cattle keeper is described as a *gopaka*, and the term *vannijja* is used for the trader.…Similarly while there are no *suddas* there are innumerable references to *dasas* and *kammakaras* who are associated not with the service of the higher vannas but with providing labour for their masters who are almost invariably *gahapatis*.…It is not just the *suddas* who are missing but the *hina jatis* or *nica kulas* of the Buddhist texts are not discernible in real situations. Except for the lone example of Matanga…*nesadas, ratthakaras*, *venas* and *pukkusas* do not exist as real people. Instead, names were often associated with a profession which had similarities with one of these categories; but the terms themselves were never used. For example, the bhikku Sunita is described as being of low origin and of having performed the work of a *puppachaddaka*, but he is not called a *pukkusa*.…Similarly, there are references to specific hunting groups like the *sakunika* (fowler) and *kevatta* (fisherman), but there are no identifiable *nesadas*.

In other words, the terms referring to birth and occupation are never used to categorise any essential features of people or to ascribe people, as a result of their occupation, to a particular birth-defined status group. As we have seen in the Jatakas, while many different occupations are described, there is no sense of an inherent polluting quality or 'bad' quality linked to any of them. No real 'castes' or 'varnas' are shown there either. There are cases where occupations seem almost caste-like, in the sense that entire villages are shown to be following one occupation; there are potter villages, carpenter villages, villages of iron-smiths, and in one Jataka story (#475) there is a Brahman carpenter in a village of carpenters. This

indeed shows a process of tribal communities being absorbed into functional occupations, with some among them (their priests and/or chieftains) being accepted into the higher varnas.

However, the process at the time was only beginning. The evidence of the Pali literature shows that the society of the first millennium BCE was not yet a caste society, that is a society where ordinary people were habituated to the practices of intermarrying only within their jati and following the professions of their fathers. Most historians, including Marxist historians, treat the period as one in which varnas were evolving into jatis; or rather, both varna and jatis were beginning to be created. In other words, when the Sanskrit literature, whether the *dharmashastras*, the epics, or any other, refers to varna and caste, the attempt is not to realistically ***describe*** the society but to ***prescribe*** for it. The references represent projections; the Brahmanic texts are an attempt to delineate an ideal model and impose it on the society. They are a manifesto for a particular form of social inequality.

The surviving fragments of earliest 'external' report on Indian caste is by Megasthenes, a Greek traveler who visited Pataliputta (Pataliputra) around 300 BCE in the age of the Mauryas, who describe a system unlike any of the Brahmanical versions. Megasthenes lists seven groups, the 'sophists' who are the sages, often naked (elsewhere these are described in a way that seems to include both Brahmans and samanas); the tillers of the soil; herdsmen; handicraftsmen and retail-dealers; warriors; 'superintendents' who are spies; and 'councillors of state'. These are said to marry only within their own group, ***except for*** the 'sophists' (summary in Klass 1980: 23–25). These fragments of Megasthenes are often taken as a kind of mis-description of an actually existing varna system, but that is unlikely. Their relation to the social reality of Mauryan society is problematic. Later travellers, for example the Chinese pilgrims of the 5th century and after, describe the four varnas much more according to Brahmanic texts, which indicates that at least that was taken as normative.

Buddhism reflected, and propagated a casteless, open society. In general there is not too much concern even for birth, in spite of references to the nobility of a Khattiya origin. This can be also seen in the Jatakas. While the misogyny regarding the 'wicked' lusts of women is striking, the other side of it is that there is little concern shown about adulterous relationships. Kings condone or forgive

these among their councillors, with the Bodhisattva's sanction; kings' sons by slave or low-born women are confirmed as kings. In one Jataka the theme that 'in love there is no unlikeness' is proclaimed and an important example given is that of a Candal woman being the mother of a King Sibi (#546). In the famous story of Vidudhabha, the son of King Pasadeni of Kosala by a slave girl from among the Sakyas, the Bodhisattva is shown as defending him and his mother's place in the kingdom. When Vidudhabha destroys the Sakyas because they refuse to give him honour, the Bodhisattva defends his kinsmen, but only three times; on the fourth Vidudhabha's army marches and destroys them (#7). In another story, the Bodhisattva recognises but does not expose a merchant's son by a slave who poses himself as a full son because he shows humility (#125). The Buddha's own friendly relations with the courtesan Ambapalli is well known, and the famous physician Jivaka was himself the son of a courtesan, abandoned only because his mother did not want an obstruction to her profession. All of this indicates, again, an open society not much concerned with birth, an attitude defended by Buddhism.

For centuries, then, there was a concerted effort by Brahmanism to impose a varna social order on society, which the Buddhists and others resisted. This battle was gradually won by Brahmanism, but the power shown by *varnashrama dharma* at certain periods and in certain regions should not be 'read' into all of India or projected unrealistically backward in time. The real history of caste in India is still to be written!

The State and Society

The Buddhists had very specific ideals of what the ideal king should be like, and their views on the state was very different from Brahmanism. One aspect of this is the relation between the state and the economy, where the Buddhist ideal both reflected and influenced society. This can be seen in the difference between the 'seven jewels' of the Buddhist king, and the 'seven limbs' of the ideal Brahmanical state. The 'jewels' include the wheel, an elephant, a horse, a gem, a queen, a minister, and the *gahapati*, the purveyor of wealth in the economy. The Brahmanical 'limbs' are the king, councillors, the territory, fortified cities, the treasury,

the military and police, and allies. The Brahmanical version only discusses the parts of the political system itself; the Buddhist version looks at the state relationship with society, specifically names the *gahapati* as the provider of wealth, and is much less concerned with violence.

This indicates that the Buddhist state, while intervening in economic life, does not attempt to manage the economy directly but rather lets 'private enterprise' do so; both merchants and the artisan guilds were respected parts of social and political life. In contrast the Brahmanic texts are highly distrustful of merchants and of private enterprise: 'Merchants…are all thieves, in effect if not in name,' says Kautilya (*Arthasastra* 1992: 236). The negative attitude to merchants seems to persist throughout the literature of Brahmanism. The 'bania' is a kind of dirty, mocked figure, allowed to exist and make money, indeed without any moral requirements laid upon his methods of money-making, but he is not seen as entrepreneurial and innovative nor is he encouraged to be so. Rather, the state is expected to manage the economy. Thus the *Arthashastra* depicts a regime with a high degree of state-run enterprises, including brothels, mines, textile factories; setting of prices; and extreme regulation of trade. Records of the Mauryas, including Asoka, do not show state-run enterprise; and the Kusanas and their successors alike supervised trade, but did not regulate it highly (Liu 1994: 79–81).

There is another important aspect of the relations between state and society that was fostered by Buddhism. Ambedkar discusses it:

> Why there have not been social revolutions in India is a question which has incessantly troubled me. There is only one answer which I can give and it is that the lower classes of Hindus have been completely disabled for direct action on account of this wretched system of Chaturvarnya (Ambedkar 1987: 70).

While Marxism has generally seen all religions as fostering contentment with an exploitative social order, as the 'opium of the people', they do not do so equally. To the extent that it encourages the idea of a just state and the right of resistance, religions can actually foster rebellion. Arthur Wright takes up this issue in regard to Buddhism in China, pointing out the ways in which many Buddhist notions (especially karma/rebirth) induced quietism, and noting

that Chinese emperors often quite consciously used it for this purpose. However, he adds,

> Mahayana Buddhism had several doctrines that were of great potential usefulness to demagogues, rebels, or would-be usurpers. One was the doctrine of the three ages or periods of Buddhism, the last culminating in the extinction of the religion: once mankind was well into this age… there could be no government worthy of the respect and loyalty of the devout. Such a notion was utterly subversive.…Almost equally dangerous were the worshipers of Maitreya, the future Buddha, who believed that the end of the world was at hand…. The north in the period of disunion had seen numerous popular uprisings centered on this cult (Wright 1965: 69)

Buddhism thus provided some ideological resources for revolt. At the same time, the Sangha as an institution that was ideally autonomous, self-governing, outside the realm of state interference, must have been troubling to rulers. Within such an institution, collective opposition to an unjust state could be fostered.

There is evidence that Buddhist teachings in India also fostered, as least to some extent, resistance to injustice. Some Jataka stories endorse popular rebellion when the ideal of rulership is not met. In one, a king and a priest steal the kingdom's treasure; the Bodhisattva knows where it is, but resists naming the king as the thief, telling story after story with the theme that what was supposed to protect and nurture proves to be destructive: 'my refuge proved my bane.' The king ignores this and continues to press him to name the thief, and when he finally does, the people are so infuriated that they rise up and beat the king and priest to death (#432). In another story, an evil king has the Bodhisattva who saved his life beaten, and the infuriated people kill the king and put the Bodhisattva in his place (#73). Strikingly, the only work of Sanskrit literature recording a peasant revolt occurs in the *Mrchhakatika* ('Little Clay Cart'), a play which was written during the time of Buddhist influence in the Satavahana regime and has Buddhist characters.

On the whole, Buddhism appeared to foster a type of political system different from that of the Chinese. Chinese politics was one of cycles: strong empires, backed up by a solid bureaucratic system, which after a period of time fell to peasant revolts, resulting eventually in the foundation of another empire. The revolts gained

legitimacy from Confucian traditions of the 'mandate of heaven', but the notion of a 'just king' implied in Buddhism also aided in depriving an existing unjust regime of this mandate.

In India, politics quickly became more fragmented, particularly after the gradual crystallisation of varna society, with numerous regional kingdoms striving with one another, facing constant turmoil within (but from feudatory intransigence rather than from popular revolt) and often aspiring for all-India hegemony, but unable to establish a long-enduring administration. After Asoka, there were endless aspirants for continental power but none succeeded. It seemed that the consolidation of the caste system encouraged an inward-looking village society, one without living connections with (or much expectation from) the larger state, with all inhabitants encouraged to follow the professions of their parents. It was almost the society of Marx's 'unchanging villages' where people carried on with their lives unheeding the waves of empire that crashed around them.

The Entrepreneurial Society

From the time of the Buddha, early Indian society was monetised to a large degree. Most of the workers (*dasa-kammakaras*) are shown as wage workers, while according to the Jatakas, most artisans, including vegetable sellers (#70), sold their products. It was only later with the triumph of Brahmanism that the famous 'self-sufficient village' of India, with its craftsmen bound by the jajmani system to give their services to the dominant landholders in exchange for a share of the crop, became prevalent.

This had global implications. Asoka's unification of much of the subcontinent under his rule promoted the development of an all-India trade that fairly quickly became part of global links. By the last part of the first millennium BCE developed, what might be called the first era of global trade, one that linked Rome, Greece, Egypt and Ethiopia to the west through India, then from northwest India through Central Asia to China and from eastern India to southeast Asia.

Indians themselves played a major role in creating this network. The Jataka stories depict both trade and enterprise. There are many examples of merchants, often including the Bodhisattva, sallying

forth, confronting robbers, ogres and other social hazards as well as deserts and natural hazards. The desert stories may indicate central Asia or Sindh. Sea travel was even more hazardous and the shipwreck stories are many. Yet it was encouraged. According to the Jatakas, Indian merchants went to Babylon, which was known as Baveru (#339), to southeast Asia, and to Sri Lanka. In story, a merchant decides to 'take ship and sail for the Gold Country [identified as Burma-Siam] whence I will bring back wealth' (#442). In another, a group of carpenters, harassed by debtors, build a mighty ship and sail to an island in the ocean where they find sugarcane (#446). In another, the Bodhisattva himself is an expert mariner; it is said that 'with him abroad no ship ever came to harm', and even after he becomes blind, he is able to guide a ship through wondrous seas where precious minerals and jewels are found (#463). In one he is a setthi or financier, suggesting to a young man how trade and 'deals', all fair needless to say, can parley a miniscale initial sum into a fortune (#4). The general attitude is shown in a Jataka in which merchants sally forth together and find a banyan tree bearing marvellous gifts; in the introductory story they chop only the branches but in the Jataka part they cut down the roots and come to grief: the moral is to take what is found but without greed, an Indian version of 'not killing the goose that lays the golden egg' (#493).

Actual trade grew significantly from the Asokan period, and was associated to a large degree with Buddhism. Following these trade routes Buddhist missionaries went to central Asia and China, though apparently not so much to the west. The eastern ports were those of Tamralipti (near modern Calcutta) which displaced the earlier Campa, Musiri on the Malabar coast and Korkai and Kavirippatinam (on the mouth of the Kaveri) on the east coast of Tamil Nadu. On the west coast Bharukaccha was the most famous and long-lasting port, but there was also Supara near modern Mumbai, and Patala on the Indus delta. Roman and Greek traders came to India, and in turn Indian merchants as well as fortune-tellers, conjurors, and prostitutes were known in Rome. Royal deputations were sent, the earliest known being sent by the king of the Pandyas to Athens in 20 BCE (Basham 1959: 228).

Trade goods to the west were mainly spices, perfumes, jewels and fine textiles; in addition sugar, rice and ghee, ivory, Indian iron which was esteemed for its purity and hardness, and live animals

and birds were also traded compared to the time of the early East India companies there was little demand in India for goods from the west then as later. While the British financed their trade with India through the opium trade in China, the Romans' inability to send goods simply meant an outward flow of gold from their empire. Roman coins have thus been found throughout the Indian penninsula, including Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. This flow, though, was seen as a serious drain by Pliny and is said to have been an important cause of the financial difficulties of the Roman Empire (ibid.: 229).

This first era of India's links with global trade began to decline as Rome and Chinese demand declined, but the decline was also part of the growing influence of Brahmanism, which turned a generalised fear of the sea into a ban on sailing the 'black waters' and a hatred of *mlecchas*. By the last part of the first millennium CE India still was linked to world trade, but it was Arab merchants who controlled this trade. Indians who had once traversed the highest reaches of the Himalayas and braved the seas of the world in trade and missionary enterprise became an ingrown nation priding themselves in the purity of their insularity.

Buddhism and Scientific Development

Buddhism also played a major role in promoting science, especially medicine, the first of the sciences and in developing education.

There are two aspects of Buddhist teachings that encouraged the development of scientific thinking in early India. First was its rationality, the fact that it encouraged thinking and discourse, rather than the unquestioning acceptance of tradition. In the traditional Brahmanic *guru–sisya* relationship, the disciple was supposed to unquestioningly serve and accept the authority of the guru. In contrast, the admonition of the Buddha to his disciples to 'be your own lamps, be your own refuges', and the whole atmosphere of dialogue and debate gave a striking emphasis to self-decision. The Buddhist follower was urged to think for himself, to judge for himself, to meditate for himself. Especially in early Buddhism the notion that no person could liberate another, but only teach and set an example, encouraged self-reliance and critical thinking. A famous *Dhammapada* verse indicates this self-reliance:

> *By oneself, indeed, is evil done;*
> *by oneself does injury come.*
> *By oneself is evil left undone;*
> *by oneself does purity come.*
> *Purity and impurity belong to oneself.*
> *No one purifies another (#165).*

While this referred to the sphere of spiritual attainment, the attitude encouraged by it carried over into all spheres of life. At the same time, the disdain for metaphysical speculation and exchange of 'views' may have discouraged philosophising—though later Buddhism had it in sufficient amounts—but it also can be seen as a protest against the too-evident tendencies in India to engage in metaphysical abstractions and grandiose cosmologies.

A second major fact promoting scientific thinking was the emphasis on causality in Buddhism. This is suggested in a formula found engraved on stupas and clay tablets all over India (Dutt 1988: 224–25n): *Of all phenomena that proceed from a cause, the Tathagata has told the cause; he has also told about their ending. Thus has spoken the Maha-samana.*

This was a reference to the *paticca-samuppada*, best translated to translated as 'dependent arising' which usually involved statements of simple causality, of a regularity of relationship. The form is as quoted in Chapter Three:

> *'I have said that grasping is the cause of becoming. Now in what way that is so, Ananda, is to be understood after this manner. Were there no grasping of any sort or kind, whatever of anyone at anything… then, there being no grasping whatever, would there, owing to this cessation of grasping, be any appearance of becoming?' 'There would not, lord.' 'Wherefore, Ananda, just that is the ground, the basis, the genesis, the cause of becoming, to wit, grasping.'*

Though this statement of simple causality referred to the 'spiritual' or psychological realm, people used to thinking in this fashion would seek out regularities in natural phenomenon. The whole approach of self-reliance, a spirit of scepticism and orientation to notions of regular relationships encouraged development in all fields of science. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya is wrong in seeing the 'materialism' of the tantric tradition and its offshoots (the Sankhya and Lokayata philosophies) as being the primary intellectual

forces which fostered a scientific spirit. These all involved the notion of a 'first principle' which may well have been materialistic. But science is not the assertion of a first principle, even a materialistic one; rather it is the search for regularities that tell us how (under specific conditions) one thing is related to another. Buddhism, which encouraged thinking in this way, was conducive to scientific development.

There is clear evidence of this association in regard to medicine. A recent study by Kenneth G. Zysk (1991) has argued that in between the earlier, magical phase of Vedic medicine which was marked by magic rituals and exorcism (1700–800 BCE) and the empiricist and rational medicine of the Ayurveda expressed is seen in the classical scientific manuals of Charaka, Bhela and Sushruta (200 BCE–400 CE) Buddhism played a crucial role in establishing a scientific medicine. Wandering physicians in the period 800–100 BCE made common cause with the intellectuals and institutions of the samana traditions, giving rise to a vast repository of medical knowledge that was empirical and rational in its orientation. This was later appropriated and fitted into an orthodox Brahmanic framework, but the origin was non-Brahmanic.

Vinaya texts show an elaborate concern for the health of the bhikkus and which provide for various medical remedies. Among the lengthy stories told in the text is that of India's most famous early physician, Jivaka. Medicine, taught rationally, thus remained a part of Buddhist education and was one of the 'secular' subjects taught in the great universities such as Nalanda—in contrast to Brahmanic ashrams, which continued for a long time to teach the ritualistic magic of Vedic medicine. Orthodox Brahmanic texts, such as Manu's, treated medicine as a 'low' occupation since it dealt with bodies and with the physical aspects of life; thus the 'Ambasthas' or medical healers, born of a Brahman father and a Vaishya mother were classified as impure Shudras.

Buddhism also provided a much more open and less ritualised education than the Brahmanic teachings. The Chinese traveler Hsuan Tsang has described the prevailing education of what would presumably be urban, middle class Buddhist youth as consisting of the 'five vidyas' or five branches of knowledge. These included *sabdavidya* (grammar), *silpasthanavidaya* (arts, mechanics, knowledge of the calender), *cikitsavidya* (medicine), *hetuvidya* (ethics and philosophy) and *adhyatmavidya* (religion). The second of these

was related to issues of technology and production. In one rather interesting Jataka known as the 'Great Tunnel Jataka' (#546), the Bodhisattva is a teacher-advisor known as Mahosadha who can be called an engineer: he constructs huge buildings and gardens; he builds great ramparts with moats, reservoirs, storehouses for the king, and he constructs a huge tunnel with 'hundreds of lamp-cells, also fitted with machinery, so that when one was opened all opened, and when one was shut, all were shut.' Mahosadha is the son of a 'rich man' who is sometimes described as a merchant, but he is called a 'clodhopper' and a 'farmer's son' by his enemies, and he marries a woman whose father is a merchant who has fallen on bad days and makes his living ploughing the land. Mahosadha's own demonstrated ability at architecture and engineering shows a 'hands on' approach of this 'commoner' birth.

Religion and Economic Development

Now we are in a position where we can take up one of the most important and controversial issues regarding religion and society—the link between religion and economic development. Here the most important contributions are those of Marx and Weber.

The Marxist view the relationship between religion and society essentially in terms of a one-way causality. Religion, whether described as the 'opium of the people' binding them to an exploitative society or as the 'sigh of the oppressed' expressing their anguish at exploitation, is seen as part of the ideological superstructure, produced by and reflecting socio-economic structures but having no independent causal influence on them. Thus Marxists have generally viewed Buddhism as simply one of many ways of reflecting social-economic relations, expressing in this case the needs of a developing, agricultural-urban, surplus-producing and commercially-oriented society, but not contributing much to it.

Two major expressions of this perspective in India are the works of Debiprasad Chattopadhyay and D.D. Kosambi. Chattopadhyaya's interpretation, which we have cited in Chapter 1, is quite simple. His major work analyses the Lokayata tradition and sees in it the reflection of the dying communal tribal order and its remnants. In contrast, the other samana traditions express the misery and exploitation of the rising class society, but are socially

dysfunctional because their fatalism rejects all attempts to alter that society and holds out no hope for changing the human condition. Buddhism, on the other hand, fits the needs of the new society and provides a solution to its dilemmas: it projects the sorrows of class exploitation, but in interpreting them idealistically, it gives only the illusion of a solution and so reconciles people to their class position. In this sense, it is an 'opium of the people' serving the interests of the elite.

Kosambi's interpretation is more nuanced. Chattopadhyaya does not go into the difference between Buddhism and Brahmanism in terms of social function. Kosambi does. He describes the increasing irrelevance of the Vedic sacrifice to the needs of the new social order, and the needless expenses the sacrifice entails. Buddhist non-violence is seen as providing the final blow to the religion which endorsed sacrifices, and as serving the interests of the rising states in minimising the expenses of violence. For Kosambi, Buddhism is ultimately a pacifistic religion useful to rulers. His explanation of the triumph of Brahmanism is basically that it proved capable of taking over from Buddhism this major achievement: it adopted non-violence partially. Once Buddhism accomplished what had been historically necessary, it became less relevant, and its increasing decadence—as reflected in the wealth tied up in the monasteries and the presumed alienation of the Sangha from the ordinary believer—made it positively harmful. Brahmanism, in contrast, could take over and foster a bhakti devotionalism that suited the needs of a feudal society. Brahmans also could maintain their role in society by pioneering the transformation of a forest-based economy into agriculture-based economy and by absorbing hunting and gathering tribes into a caste-based agricultural society. Though he does not use the term, Kosambi at points comes close to viewing Brahmanism as the 'national religion' of India, capable of providing what is necessary for economic growth and capable of reform.

One important question arises from most Marxist interpretations. Kosambi, for example, defines history as the study of the succession of the modes of production. In the classic Marxist theory, these stages are primitive communism slavery, feudalism and capitalism (and then, of course, socialism). Buddhism in these terms was, for both Kosambi and Chattopadhyaya, presumably an ideal religion for the age of slavery. Yet it is never shown what about it is characteristic of a slave society. Indeed, the society of the first

millennium BCE as described in Buddhist texts is only partly a slave society; it rather rests on wage labour and monetary relationships; it is an emerging commercial society in which religions such as Buddhism and Jainism appeal to and justify the monetary orientation of a merchant and business class. Why should such a dynamic and in many ways even capitalistic society ***precede*** the more backward, stable, agriculturally-oriented feudal society of the caste system? This question is never answered. To even raise it would have cast doubts about the theory of inevitable advancement and development of modes of production that is assumed in Marxism.

A contemporary Marxist who defines his theory as anti-Brahmanical and who has jumped into this debate is Sharad Patil, who describes Buddhism as the ideological bearer of the 'feudal revolution'—thus countering Kosambi's depiction of bhakti-oriented Brahmanism as more appropriate to feudalism. But Patil's interpretation has equally many puzzles. He describes his theory as 'Marxism-Phule-Ambedkarism', because it sees India traditionally as a caste society rather than a class society; but this seems to mean primarily that he substitutes for the first three of the traditional five stages the following: matriarchal tribal society, a slave system based on dasa-Shudra slavery (the varna system), and caste-feudalism. He sees Buddhism in India as representing the 'feudal revolution' because he interprets first millennium BCE society as the period which witnessed the defeat of the slave society (the *gana-sanghas*) and the older varna order by caste-feudalism. It is revolutionary because the slavery of the *dasa* is replaced by the more partial subordination of the Shudra in the agricultural society, and because the emerging feudal society represents a more productive stage (Patil 1982, 1991). However, this explanation also does not explain the capitalist features—the monetary orientation, the individualism, the commercialisation of the society depicted in the Buddhist scriptures. Nor does it explain why, if Buddhism was the religion of a 'feudal revolution', it should disappear in the face of a resurgent Brahmanism. Patil's thesis leaves more questions than answers.

Max Weber, who pioneered theories discussing the economic role of religion and the linkage of capitalism with Protestantism in Europe, represents a step beyond Marx in terms of basic theory. He insists he is not refuting Marx so much as qualifying him, but he nevertheless gives an independent causal role to religion. Weber focuses much more on the analysis of individual action and its

subjective orientation than Marxists do; and he describes his methodology using a striking metaphor: 'Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the "world images" that have been created by ideas have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest' (Weber 1958a: 280). This modifies Marx in two ways: First, it sees interests as basic but ideal, specifically pointing to individual concerns for meaning and 'salvation', and it is mentioned along with 'material interests'. And second, it argues that world-views resulting from ideologies, religious or secular, can affect crucially the ways in which interests operate. This implies a pluralism; it implies an occasional lack of fit; it implies that there are some affinities; it describes a two-way causality: social existence conditions the nature of religions (because human consciousness is always in the background of material reality) but religions also condition society (because they affect human action which in turn changes societies).

Weber's specific argument about the role of Protestantism, and particulary Calvinism, in the rise of capitalism is, however, a different matter. He sees two basic ideological–subjective factors as crucial for the development of a capitalist society: rationalism and the ethically motivated individual who is oriented to economic enterpreneurship. Rationality includes the idea of the world as calculable and understandable and the breaking of the bonds of magic and ritual orientation that restrict economic activity (e.g. caste barriers to production in India, restrictions on 'usury' in medieval Catholicism). Some religious sanction for rationality, because of the previous dominance of anti-rational ideologies, is necessary in the beginning for capitalism though once capitalism comes into existence it can maintain rationality of this sort on its own. The second necessary factor is the rise of individuals who are motivated to become rational, non-luxury-loving, wealth accumulating capitalist entrepreneurs, whose religion not only sanctions worldly success but positively motivates them to seek it. This sanction and motivation, according to Weber is supplied by Calvinism which takes worldly success as the sign of the grace of God, and when in the face of the awful doubt raised in the individual's mind about whether or not he is saved, psychologically motivates him to seek this success, though he must behave frugally and morally, and to take that as at least a social sign of his salvation. Again, as in the case

of rationality, once established a capitalist society has any number of ways to continue to provide such motivation (Weber 1958b).

After setting out this thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber turned to the study of the religions of India and China for comparative evidence as to why capitalism could not arise in these societies, in spite of the presence of other material prerequisites for it. Here Brahmanism is seen as anti-rational due to its orientations towards rituals and magic and the deadening of entrepreneurship and capacities is taken to be caused by the caste system. But what about Buddhism? Weber argues that Buddhism is also anti-rational. He believes that the existence of rules in the Sangha, is not relevant, and says that 'a rational economic ethic could hardly develop in this sort of religious order' (Weber 1996: 216). This is a bit of a strained argument, and not only downplays the continued association of Buddhism with commerce and merchants, but also seems to ignore data on the economic functioning of monasteries in China.

As for the motivated individual, Weber interprets Buddhism along with Hinduism as representing an other-worldly asceticism. He argues that, Buddhism is anti-individualistic as well as anti-rational, because it sees salvation in turning away from the world, in stilling passions, in denying the legitimacy of the will to succeed in anything. According to him, because the *atman* is denied, and because the individual is seen as a collection of sensations and consciousness and physical form, all striving against each other, individualism is denigrated. Since craving (*tanha*) is seen as the cause of sorrow, something to be overcome, Weber, who interprets craving as the will to life, thus sees Buddhism as so otherworldly that it can provide no foundation for this-worldly ethical action (Weber 1996: 221). All the Buddhist texts that seem to do so, along with the major spread of Buddhism itself, are interpreted as resulting from the influence of Asoka.

This interpretation[5] is too much influenced by a particular competitive doctrine of individualism. Buddhism's denial of the *atman* was not necessarily a denial of the individual, and its injunction to overcome passion could just as easily be seen as an 'inner-worldly

[5] Weber here seems very much influenced by Hermann Oldenberg's position in the famous Rhy Davids–Oldenberg debates of the time. See also the criticism by Romila Thapar.

asceticism' as Protestantism. Neither Buddhism nor Protestantism saw the successful merchant or the loyal, disciplined productive worker as the highest ideal. But both gave social sanction and respect to the successful merchant and to accumulation done through moral means. 'Realizing the kingdom of heaven on earth' was about as far from fundamentalist Protestantism as it was from Buddhism, but both had clear definitions and ideas about the ideal society which they visualised as an open and egalitarian one. Both encouraged rationalism, and denied the ritualistic, magic-centered life fostered by ideologies such as Brahmanism.

There is an unexamined assumption at the heart of the Weberian thesis. This is that economic growth is somehow unnatural, so individuals have to be specially and unusually motivated to be productive and accumulative. Growth may well be 'unusual' and even harmful from the perspective of religious and political ideologies such as medieval Catholicism and Brahmanic *varnashrama dharma* that discourage it and that positively foster a 'harmonious' and stable social order—but historically and humanly speaking, development is just as 'natural'. Rather than assuming that humans naturally prefer to live in a harmonious, rooted, agriculture-based society and therefore it would take a tremendous motivation to push individuals into the kind of rational, economically-motivated behaviour that produces growth, we can argue on the contrary that societies have a 'natural' tendency to develop unless frustrated by particularly irrational or binding social relations. In this view, the task of analysis for a socio-economic history is not to look for the causes of a unique breakthrough but rather, assuming a widespread potential for development, to look at the negative factors blocking it. If we follow Adam Smith, for example, and argue that a 'propensity to truck and barter' is natural to humans, then the question of 'moral sentiments' is more one of the need for a morality to modulate this acquisitiveness, not to push it forward but to temper it with compassion.

This seems to fit the situation of the first millennium BCE in India—growth was taking place, the society was dynamic; the danger was rather one of acquisitive and amoral individualism. In this situation, Buddhism acted not so much to promote growth as to give it an ethical foundation while endorsing it; in contrast Brahmanic Hinduism pushed the society back into stagnation. Buddhism, in discouraging ritualism, in countering birth-based

ascription, in setting its face against all notions of purity–pollution, gave positive encouragement to the developing society of openness, equality and mobility.

A recent study arguing in favour of a similar view is that of G. Upreti, who has emphasised the role of early Buddhism in creating an ethics appropriate to an individualistic (market-oriented) society, including the nuclear family and private property-oriented commercialism:

> The early Buddhist world outlook…firmly fastened the individual to 'well-earned private property' at the economic level, to a 'caring patriarchal family' at the social level, and to an 'orderly state' at the political level. If the individual moulded his behavior and thinking at the anvil of non-egotism not only he himself became a rightful holder of private property, an ideal householder and a good citizen, but also enormously contributed to the formation of a viable economy, a strong and solid social structure, and a healthy and durable state' (Upreti 1997: 143, 168).

The main problem with Upreti's argument, however, is that in stressing the movement towards a rationalist individualism, he sees Buddhism as the culmination of a trend beginning with the Upanishads and Jainism, and thus he ignores some radical differences. Buddhism's 'anti-self' position was linked to a much more 'other-' oriented ethics than either of its two major competitors. Its individualism was very much an individualism-within-society, an other-oriented individualism. The Buddhist concept of the individual personality was very concrete and specific; while denying the 'self' in the doctrine of *anatta*, it continued to emphasise the subjective, emotional, acting agent—and the necessity of respect for one another. There was no reference to divinity, no urge to worship or devotion, no rites and rituals in the life prescribed for the individual, but rather dispassionate and compassionate behaviour. This ethicisation of life extended into the simple rules that were prescribed for social relations as well as the more difficult disciplines for the bhikkhu or bhikkhuni seeking liberation.

In the end, Buddhism, for all its concern for individual renunciation and freedom from passionlessness, helped in the creation of a vibrant, open, commercially developing society exchanging ideas and goods with the rest of the world. Its decline was correlated with the decline of the open society.

5

The Defeat of Buddhism in India

One of the greatest mysteries about Buddhism in India is the cause of its gradual decline in influence and then its total disappearance as an overtly practised religion and way of life by the second millennium CE. Buddhism has never been the sole 'religion' of a society, claiming hegemony over all spheres of life in the way that Christianity and Islam do: it co-existed in China with Confucianism, in Japan with Shintoism, in southeast Asian countries with various local cults and practices. In all these countries there has been conflict, tremendous fluctuation in the situation of Buddhist teachings and institutions, and periods of repression. But Buddhism in some form or another survived as recognisably Buddhism in societies as diverse as China, Japan and Korea. Why did this not happen in India? Why could Buddhism not co-exist with Brahmanic Hinduism?

This is a phenomenon that requires sociological analysis. One tentative answer is that just as 'Buddhism' is not a religion in the conventional sense, 'Brahmanism' also was more than just a religion. It included a required social practice (*varnashrama dharma*) and it absorbed, or rather co-opted and reinterpreted, many indigenous religions and cults. In the end, we have the rather strange situation where a religion claiming the kind of 'tolerance' which Hinduism does did not allow scope for Buddhism. There seem to have been inherent contradictions between Buddhist and Brahmanic teachings, such that one had to drive out the other. The second question that needs answering, then, is, if this is so, why in the end did Buddhism succumb?

An actual survey of the state of Buddhism in India, which reports by Chinese travellers make possible, might help in answering this question.

Hsuan Tsang's Visit to India

Perhaps the most famous world traveller in history is the Chinese monk Hsuan Tsang, who visited India in the early years of the 7th century, during the reign of Harsha. A Chinese Buddhist from a mandarin background, his primary concern was to collect the important scriptures of Buddhism and visit the sacred sites of his religion. He was little interested in the social conditions existing in the places he visited, and he was a guest either in monasteries or of the powerful and great. With Sanskrit as the only Indian language he knew, he conversed primarily with Brahmans and many of his comments (for instance, that the language spoken in outlying areas is a degeneration of the 'pure' Sanskrit) reflect both their biases and his own. Nevertheless, he was a careful observer who made faithful efforts to record what he observed and the geography of his travels. Given the paucity of historical sources on Indian life, his observations gain even greater significance (all references unless otherwise mentioned are to Beal 1983, Parts I and II).[1]

Hsuan Tsang begins by giving an overview of India, noting the caste divisions and mentioning the Brahmans for their purity and nobility. 'Tradition has so hallowed the name of this tribe that… people generally speak of India as the country of the Brahmans' (I: 69). His description of castes cites the four varnas, apparently as described to him by the Brahmans. In contrast to earlier depictions of farmers as Vaishyas, he describes commerce as the occupation of the Vaishyas and agriculture as that of the Shudras; this shows that

[1] In understanding his travels, I have relied on maps provided by geographers Philip Schwartzberg and Joseph Schwartzberg, though I have some differences with them especially regarding conventional interpretations of the Maharashtra section of his travels. Uncertainties regarding distances covered and directions are so immense that there is speculation that Hsuan Tsang lost most of his manuscripts while crossing the Atak river on his return. In this brief summary I have also given the current form of place names or the Prakrit/Pali form, since these are closer to the actual spoken names of the places, rather than the Sanskritised form used by the traveller himself who spoke only Sanskrit with his translators. Another area of uncertainty arises from these translation problems and the fact that numerous places in India often are given the same name (e.g. 'Kosala' in central India deriving from the northern kingdom of the first millennium BCE).

the status of agriculture had declined since the time of the Buddha. Then he adds, 'there are other classes of many kinds that intermarry according to their several callings. It would be difficult to speak of these in detail' (I: 82). Either the multitude of jatis as we known them was beginning to come into existence, or here also he is referring to the Brahmanical way of classifying 'mixed jatis' rather than to his own observations. He comments, in an apparent reference to untouchability, that 'butchers, fishers, dancers, executioners, and scavengers and so on have their abodes without the city. In coming and going these persons are bound to keep on the left side of the road until they arrive at their homes' (II: 74). This differs from the earlier reference by the 5th century pilgrim Fa Hsien to 'Candalas' living in their separate villages. Aside from this description, throughout the book there is almost no concrete sense of an existing caste system; a few times he describes a king as being of a particular varna, but that is all.

Hsuan Tsang was impressed with the mildness of the political regime. India is described as a country where there was little corporal punishment, where criminals were occasionally punished by cutting off their noses or hands and feet and expelling them into the wild where there were some tests by ordeals (I: 83–84). All of this was mild compared to the tortures of societies like Europe or China at the time. The administration is described as 'founded on benign principles' with little conscription or forced labour. The whole description seems to indicate a minimally-administered state, relying for most of its wealth on its centrally-controlled territories:

> The private demesnes of the crown are divided into four principal parts; the first is for carrying out the affairs of state and providing sacrificial offerings; the second is for providing subsidies for the ministers and chief officers of state; the third is for rewarding men of distinguished ability; and the fourth is for charity to religious bodies…In this way the taxes on the people are light, and the personal service required of them is moderate. Each one keeps his own worldly goods in peace, and all till the ground for their subsistence. Those who cultivate the royal estates pay a sixth part of the produce as tribute. The merchants who engage in commerce come and go in carrying out their transactions. The river-passages and the road-barriers are open on payment of a small toll. When the public works require it, labour is

> exacted but paid for. The payment is in strict proportion to the work done… (II: 87).

Politically, though he describes the greatness of Harsha, whose empire extended over north India at the time, the subcontinent is seen as fragmented. He describes it as broken up into fairly small 'countries', each with a capital city and, usually, a 'king'. For each, he gives the approximate number of Buddhist monasteries and bhikkus, and the number of 'Deva temples' and some idea of how many non-Buddhists (outsiders) there were. The latter include both Jains or 'Nirgranthas' and Shaivites or 'Pashupatas'.

Hsuan Tsang entered India from Afghanistan in the northwest, and describes India as beginning approximately at the borders of current Pakistan. The first 'countries' he describes include Taxila, then tributary to Kashmir as were most of the other small regions around; he gives the stories of Panini and Kanishka here. Kashmir itself is described with the romanticism that this land inspires in almost everyone. In reporting how the Buddhist council came to be held in Kashmir, he recounts how Kanishka 'desired to go to his own country, as he suffered from the heat and moisture [of continental India]', and how his counsellor responds,

> the mind of the assembly is well affected towards this country; the land is guarded on every side by mountains, the Yakshas defend its frontiers, the soil is rich and productive and it is well provided with food. Here both saints and sages assemble and abide; here the spiritual Rishis wander and rest (I: 153).

This northwest region was the historic center of the Kushana empire, and also the scene of conflict—between the Kushanas and the pre-Buddhists of Kashmir, between Shaivites and Buddhists, and between the Huna king Mihirakula and his foe, described as the Tukhura ruler of Himatala who was descended from the Sakya race (I: 157–58). It was apparently Mihirakula who had destroyed much of the Buddhist monuments in the Taxila and Gandhara regions, where numerous monasteries were in ruins with only a few bhikkus residing there. According to the traveller, since the anti-Buddhist 'Krityas' then ruled Kashmir, 'this kingdom is not much given to the faith'; still he saw a hundred monasteries with 5000

bhikkus in all, as well as four stupas built by Asoka (I: 148–57). Hsuan Tsang also tells many stories of the Nagas, whose legends dominated the region, calling them 'dragons'.

As the traveller moved throughout north India, Buddhism was clearly on the retreat. The exception was the center of Harsha's kingdom, Kanyakumbja or Kanauj in today's Uttar Pradesh, where Hsuan Tsang noted about an 'equal number of Buddhists and heretics' and found 100 monasteries and 10,000 bhikkus along with 200 'Deva temples' with 'some thousands' of followers (I: 206–07).

This decline however was most striking in the historic lands of Buddhism, in what is now Bihar. One can perhaps expect that Prayag, even then one of the holy cities of Brahmanism, had a 'very great number' of heretics. However, even in Sravasti, the capital of the Lichhavis, the non-Buddhists (including the Jains) vastly outnumbered the 'believers', and Kapilavastu, the region of Gotama's birth, was a land of deserted cities, with its capital overthrown and in ruins and few settled villages. The same was true of Kusinagara, the small village that was the site of the *mahaparinibbana*. In Varanasi also, 30 monasteries with 3000 bhikkus were outnumbered by a hundred Deva temples and 10,000 worshippers, mostly said to be Pashupatas and Jains. Vaishali, where the 'sacred vestiges are so numerous that it would be difficult to recount them all' (II: 73) had 'several hundred monasteries, which are mostly dilapidated' and only a few bhikkus left, but 'several tens of Deva temples' with numerous Jains among their worshippers (II: 66). The one-time center of the *gana-sangha* confederation of the Vajjians was in an equally desolate condition. Only Magadha, the center of the Mauryan empire, offered a different story: 50 monasteries with 10,000 bhikkus; here Hsuan Tsang recounts many legends of Asoka and describes the rich and luxurious university of Nalanda.

On the whole, this poor condition not only shows the major set-back suffered by Buddhism, but also suggests that it was not simply and voluntarily replaced by the Brahmanic Hindu culture. Some open political conflict and religious repression is described, and we can also infer that the depopulation and devastation, that characterised Kapilavastu and Kusinagara, must have resulted from a severe repression.

The picture began to change as Hsuan Tsang moved east and south. Brahmans had reached Bengal and the east relatively late, and had little hegemony there. In 'Pundravardhana' (northern

Bengal, the land of the Paundas or later 'Pods', considered a low 'mixed caste' by Brahmanical lawbooks) the land was described as 'regularly cultivated and rich in crops' (II: 199); it was a small kingdom with 20 monasteries with 3000 monks and 'some hundred Deva temples,' mostly Jains. Samatata, on the sea coast, a long-time center of Buddhist-dominated trade with lands in southeast Asia, was described as 'rich in all kinds of grain produce' (II: 199); it had about 30 monasteries with about 2000 monks, and again Jains dominated among the rest. However, in Tamralipti (the west Bengal delta area), Buddhism was declining; there were only 10 monasteries and 50 'Deva temples in which various sectaries dwell mixed together' (II: 201).

Kamarupa (Assam) was almost completely a non-Buddhist land. In Udra (Orissa) the traveller found a people who were mostly Buddhists and a hundred monasteries with 10,000 bhikkus. There he visited both a miraculous monastery on a mountain and a sea-port, Charitra, where 'merchants depart for distant countries and strangers come and go and stop on their way. The walls of the city are strong and lofty. Here are found all sorts of rare and precious articles' (II: 205). The Oriyas, according to him, were 'tall…of a yellowish-black complexion…. Their words and language differ from Central India. They love learning and apply themselves to it without intermission' (II: 204).

From Orissa Hsuan Tsang moved south, some 240 miles through 'great forests' to the small kingdom of Konyodha, where Buddhism did not exist, and then another 300–500 miles south through 'a vast desert, jungle and forests, the trees of which mount to heaven and hide the sun' to reach Kalinga. This was apparently on the Orissa–Andhra border. It was described as regularly cultivated, and as having abundant flowers and fruits and 'the great tawny wild elephant' in a burning climate. He writes that 'the disposition of the people [is] vehement and impetuous' and most were attached to non-Buddhist beliefs, and adds that the country had a very dense population in the old days but was then depopulated (II: 208). This is attributed to a story about a Rishi with magical powers who cursed the people; the real story of Asoka's bloody victory over Kalinga had apparently been lost to legends.

From there the traveller went about 360 miles northwest to Kosala. Its capital at the time was most likely what is now the town of Pavani

in Bhandara district of Maharashtra, which has remains of stupas dating to the Maurya–Shunga period. Dalits in Maharashtra in the 1950s believed that the 'Nagas' after whom Nagpur was presumably named were original Buddhists, and argued for making nearby Nagpur the site for Ambedkar's *dhammadiksha* ceremony because of its ancient Buddhist associations (see Moon 2001: 149). On this question, it is worth quoting Hsuan Tsang:

> The frontiers consist of encircling mountain crags; forests and jungles are found together in succession…the soil is rich and fertile, and yields abundant crops. The towns and villages are close together. The population is very dense. The men are tall and black complexioned. The disposition of the people is hard and violent; they are brave and impetuous. There are both heretics and believers here. They are earnest in study and of a high intelligence. The king is of the Ksattriya race; he greatly honours the law of Buddha and his virtue and love are far renowned (II: 209).

Kosala and its capital were also linked to the famous Mahayana monk-philosopher Nagarjuna, and Hsuan Tsang goes on to recount tales of the marvellous feats and compassion of this great Buddhist and his association with a Satavahana king.

Today the western districts of Orissa state are referred to as Kosala by agitators who are demanding a separate state. The people of this area, which includes the heavily drought-prone Kalahandi and adjoining districts, during times of distress migrate not eastward to coastal Orissa but westward to Raipur and Nagpur. It appears that in ancient times the whole region from east of Nagpur to western Orissa was identified as Kosala or Mahakosala. Pavani, on the Wainganga, is referred to as Benakatha ('banks of the Bena/Vena') in an early Satavahana inscription, and the region also can be identified with the 'southern Kosala' which Rama is supposed to have given as a gift to his son Kush when he divided his kingdom (Mirashi II: 227–30). The adivasis of the region are the Gonds, and in western Orissa, the Khonds; both are indigenous groups speaking a Dravidian language. Vidarbha, or 'Mahakosala' was indeed a center of a group of peoples known in the classical literature as 'Nagas'. These must have been the rulers referred to, and the traveller's evidence thus suggests a Dravidian origin of the 'Naga' peoples: Gond kings have always claimed Kshatriya status.

Hsuan Tsang found 100 monasteries and 'somewhat less than 10,000 bhikkus and about 70 'Deva temples' in Kosala.

From there, travelling south, Hsuan Tsang found Buddhism contending for dominance in the Dravidian areas with both Jainism and the rising force of Shaivism. In Andhra, whose capital was Vengi, Buddhists and non-Buddhists appeared nearly equal in number. He describes the soil as rich and fertile and notes that 'The temperature is hot, and the manners of the people fierce and impulsive' (II: 217). Going further south, about 200 miles 'through the desert forest' he comes to a country called Dhanakataka, today's Vijayawada. Near its capital was an old Buddhist center, which has been identified from the stupa and great ruins found near Amravati. This region was also hot, with much desert area and thin population. There were a large number of 'mostly deserted and ruined' monasteries; about 20 where about 1000 bhikkus remained. A 'hundred Deva temples' with numerous people of different beliefs frequenting them dominated, showing the advance of both Shaivism and Jainism.

Further travel 200 miles southwest brought him to the Tamil region. Culya or Chola, the first country that he visited, did not impress him:

> The climate is hot; the manners of the people dissolute and cruel. The disposition of the men is naturally fierce; they are attached to heretical teaching. The sangharamas are ruined and dirty as well as the priests. There are some tens of Deva temples and many [Jain] ascetics (II: 227).

However unhappy Hsuan Tsang was with the existing situation, he did see a stupa built by Asoka and said that Tathagata had in ancient times dwelt there himself.

Going further south about 300 to 325 miles through a 'wild forest district' to 'Dravida', whose capital is identified as Kanchipuram, a fertile, rich and hot country with hundreds of monasteries with 10,000 bhikkhus, competing with 80 Deva temples and numerous Jains. He writes, 'Tathagata in olden days, when living in the world, frequented this country much; he preached the law here and converted men, and therefore Asoka-raja built stupas over all the sacred spots where these traces exist' (II: 229). He may not have actually visited regions further south, though he describes a country

called Malakuta, and Ceylon, which could be easily visited by sea from there.

From Kanchipuram he went either north or northwest for 400 miles, going through 'a forest wild, in which are a succession of deserted towns, or rather little villages [where] brigands, in concert together, wound and capture travellers' (II: 253). He came to a country he called 'Kong-kin-na-pu-lo', rendered as Konkanapura. The identity of this has puzzled scholars;[2] but one possibility is Kolhapur in what is now southern Maharashtra. As the traveller describes it, the people were 'black complexioned, their manners fierce and uncultivated' but, once again, esteeming learning, virtue and talent. He found both Buddhists and non-Buddhists in great numbers, including about a hundred sangharamas with some 10,000 bhikkhus.

From there he went northwest, again troubled by wild forests, savage beasts and robber bands, nearly 500 miles to a kingdom in Maharashtra. Its capital was described as located on the west side of a great river. Though this is usually identified with Nasik on the Godavari, the only river that fits with the next stage of the journey, west across the Narmada river to Bharuch, is the Tapi. This puts the kingdom in Khandesh in the far northern part of today's Maharashtra. At that time, it was the center of an empire, which was ruled by Pulakesin, a conqueror himself and the only ruler in all of India to defeat Harsha. Here Hsuan Tsang gives one of his more colourful descriptions:

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[2] A Golconda identification is given by Beal (II: 254n), who records others arguing for sites as wildly distant from each other as Mysore or Vanavasi in the southern tip of Uttar Kanara district of Karnataka. The Schwartzbergs identify it with a site near Badami/Vatapi. Bharat Patankar has proposed Kolhapur. The distances and directions from Kanchipuram to 'Konkanapura' fit for either Badami/Vatapi or Kolhapur, and a generally north direction from either one could lead to either Nasik or a site in Khandesh. The Nasik identification for 'Maharashtra' would allow the next stage of the journey (to Bharuch) to fit if it is assumed (as the Schwartbergs do) that Hsuan Tsang visited the Ajanta caves and then proceeded roughly west and across the Narmada; in this case the direction for this leg of the travel fits but not the distance! The Kolhapur needs to be investigated further, if only because the Brahmanic scholars up to now who have provided evidence consider Nasik as a holy city and would not like the color definition given for Kolhapur. It is indisputable, however, that the masses of Maharashtrians are basically dark-skinned Dravidians.

> The climate is hot; the disposition of the people is honest and simple; they are tall of stature, and of a stern, vindictive character. To their benefactors they are grateful; to their enemies relentless.... If a general loses a battle, they do not inflict punishment, but present him with women's clothes, and so he is driven to seek death for himself. The country provides for a band of champions to the number of several hundred. Each time they are about to engage in conflict they intoxicate themselves with wine, and then one man with lance in hand will meet ten thousand and challenge them in fight.... The king, in consequence of his possessing these men and elephants, treats his neighbours with contempt. He is of the Kshatriya caste, and his name is Pulakesi....His plans and undertakings are widespread, and his beneficent actions are felt over a great distance...At the present time Siladitya Maharaj (Harsha) has conquered the nations from east to west, and carried his arms to remote districts, but the people of this country alone have not submitted to him... (II: 256–57).

Here also the traveller found a mixed religious situation, about 100 monasteries with 5000 or so bhikkus, and about 100 'Deva temples'. The affiliations of these are not mentioned. He also describes what can only be the Ajanta caves, which were built under the preceeding dynasty.

From here Hsuan Tsang went to Gujarat, travelling about 200 miles west and crossing the Narmada to Bharukaccha (Bharuch). This once famous seaport, center of the prosperous trade with Rome and other lands outside India, had become an insignificant small kingdom with approximately an equal number of monasteries and 'Deva temples'. The traveller was not impressed with the people, who seem to have fallen under a collective depression on account of their loss of economic status: 'Their ways are cold and indifferent; the disposition of the people crooked and perverse' (II: 259). From there he went northeast to Malava (Malwa), whose people are 'remarkable for their great learning' and where a hundred monasteries with 2000 bhikkus seem to be outnumbered by the 'very numerous heretics', mostly Shaivites. The Gujarat itinerary appears to be confused; he went southwest to a bay and then northwest to come to Atali, then northwest again to Kaccha, then north 200 miles to Valabhi.

Valabhi was a larger area, where 'the population is very dense; the establishments rich. There are some hundred houses or so, who possess a hundred lakhs. The rare and valuable products of distant

regions are here stored in great quantities.' Here, in contrast to Bharukaccha, the mercantile riches of Gujarat were quite visible. There were about a hundred monasteries with about 6000 priests, mostly Theravada Buddhists, competing with 'several hundred Deva temples with very many sectaries of different sorts.' Hsuan Tsang describes the king, a Kshatriya, as having recently proclaimed himself a Buddhist, and as giving away great valuables in a yearly assembly (II: 266–68). This was the region of the great monastery-university complex at Valabhi (Dutt 1988: 224–32). From here he again went northeast but it is noted that the distances and itinerary do not fit, and here Beal himself speculates that the traveller had perhaps lost his original documents and was reconstructing from memory (II: 269n).

Hsuan Tsang's travels then took him north 360 miles to Gurjjara, an area extending into Rajasthan and Malwa, which had only one monastery; then southeast 560 miles to Ujjain, where the monasteries were mostly in ruins and Shaivism was triumphant, then after a north-northeast circle, back to Gujjara and north nearly 400 miles where after going 'through wild deserts and dangrous defiles [and] crossing the great river Sin-tu, we come to the kingdom of Sin-tu (Sind)' which is one of the few described as having a Shudra king (II: 272).

All the Gujarat–Rajasthan regions had none or very few Buddhists. But Sindh, described as a land producing an abundance of wheat and millet, suitable for the breeding of oxen, sheep, camels and other animals, and with men whose disposition is 'hard and impulsive; but honest and upright', was a Buddhist country. The people 'study without aiming to excel; they have faith in the law of the Buddha. There are several hundred [monasteries], occupied by about 10,000 priests.' These were Theravada Buddhists and this Mahayana traveller sees them as 'indolent and given to indulgence and debauchery.' As with numerous places throughout India, the Buddha was said to have frequently visited the country and Asoka had thus established 'several tens of stupas in places where the sacred traces of his presence are found.' The traveller also describes a large, strange group of families settled by the side of the river, who were Theravada Buddhists cattle herders:

> By the side of the river Sindh, along the flat marshy lowlands for some thousand li, there are several hundreds of thousands (a very great

> many) of families settled. They are of an unfeeling and hasty temper and are given to bloodshed only. They give themselves exclusively to tending cattle, and from this derive their livelihood. They have no masters, and, whether men or women, have neither rich nor poor; they shave their heads and wear the robes of Bhikshus, whom they resemble outwardly, whilst they engage themselves in the ordinary affairs of lay life (II: 273).

From Sindh Hsuan Tsang went nearly 200 miles to Multan, where there were no Buddhists but many who 'sacrifice to spirits'; he found also a 'very magnificent' temple to the Sun there (II: 274). His further travels through what is now Pakistan found a fair number of Buddhists and many Shaivites at some places, but only after going northwest and 'traversing great mountains and crossing wide valleys' for some 400 miles, did he consider himself to have left the frontiers of India (II: 282).

This was an impressive round through the subcontinent. The Buddhist presence was strong even at his time. But clearly, Buddhism was on the retreat. While there were still many strongholds of the Dhamma, there is a persisting image of abandoned and dilapidated monasteries with few bhikkus remaining. It appears that at the time of Hsuan Tsang, after a millennia-long historical conflict, Brahmanism had emerged dominant. Buddhism was declining and it would, within centuries, vanish from the land of its origin.

Why did this happen?

Interpretations of the Decline of Buddhism

The prevailing picture of the decline of Buddhism in India is summed up by A.L. Basham, whose classic study argues that persecution played only a minor role; rather the major factor was a reformed religion which we can now call 'Hinduism', which transformed worship of Shiva and Vishnu (the latter in various *avatars* which could absorb local deities) into objects of fervent devotion. Backed by the aggressive campaigning and institution-building of Sankara, this revived Hinduism confronted a Buddhism that centered in the monasteries, had become weak, even decadent. Though it had theoretically, and for some time in practice as well, been a separate religion, challenging caste and denying the Vedas, it failed

to base itself in the practical aspects of popular life; the life-rituals of even Buddhist families were handled by Brahmans. Thus the Buddha could be re-interpreted as the ninth *avatar* of Vishnu, while his teachings were ignored. When the Muslim invasions came, the final blow was dealt to this nearly vanished Buddhism, vulnerable because of its lack of support in the life of the people and its centralisation in the monasteries (Basham 1958: 265–66).

These familiar themes are given a Marxist interpretation by D.D. Kosambi, in an article originally written in 1956, where he argues in terms of the changing connection with the relations of production (i.e., the economic functions of Buddhism and Hinduism):

> The major civilizing function of Buddhism had ended by the seventh century AD. The ahimsa doctrine was universally admitted, if not practised. Vedic sacrifices had been abandoned...the new problem was to induce docility in the village cultivators, without an excessive use of force. This was done by religion, but not by Buddhism. The new class structure in the villages appeared as caste, always scorned by the Buddhists. Primitive tribesmen were enrolled as new castes. Both tribesman and peasant relied heavily on ritual, which the Buddhist monk was forbidden to practice; ritual remained a monopoly of the Brahman. Moreover, the Brahmin at that time was a pioneer who could stimulate production, for he had a good working calendar for predicting the times of ploughing, sowing, harvesting. He knew something of new crops and trade possibilities. He was not a drain upon production as had been his sacrificing ancestors, or the large Buddhist monasteries. A compromise could also be effected by making the Buddha an avatar of Visnu. So, formal Buddhism faded away (Kosambi 1986: 66).

To substantiate his accusation of decadence, he writes, referring to a description by Hsuan Tsang:

> The sangha now depended on the higher classes, without the minimum contact with the common people which was needed even to serve those higher classes well. A tooth-relic of the Buddha was exhibited at the fee of one gold piece. Naturally, prophecies were current of the end of the religion, when such and such an image should have sunk out of sight into the soil. That the religion itself had already sunk virtually out of sight in the mire of wealth and superstition would seem clear to modern eyes not blinded by faith (Kosambi 1975: 315–16).

This is eloquent, but Kosambi, the Marxist son of a famous Buddhist convert (see Chapter 7), is never so sarcastic regarding Brahmanical ritual!

The theme of Buddhist decadence is a pervasive one, finding support in Marxist analyses of the wealth of the Sangha as essentially non-productive and result of exploitation of the peasants who provided the surpluses which maintained them. A good example is a study by Jacques Gernet on the economic role of Buddhism in Chinese society. The Vinaya texts, he argues, had sophisticated legal concepts regarding property, and because with state support the monasteries were free from taxation and corvee labour, they could attract people away from the tedious life of farming to a supposedly non-productive life. Some monasteries were maintained by the imperial state; others were privately maintained, and some functioned as large estates living off the labour of peasant serfs. Many became business enterprises. Monasteries, in other words, were far from being the centres for collective living and spiritual search that they had been meant to be (Gernet 1995). While there has never been sufficient data to study monasteries so closely in India, the notion of exploitative monasteries is repeated by most Marxists, including Kosambi.

Finally, the idea that it was Muslim invasions, with the sacking of many of the great centers of Buddhism, such as the university-monasteries at Nalanda, which dealt the final blow is widely accepted in India today. This 'sword of Islam' thesis was accepted even by Ambedkar:

> brahmanism beaten and battered by the Muslim invaders could look to the rulers for support and sustenance and get it. Buddhism beaten and battered by the Muslim invaders had no such hope. It was an uncared for orphan and it withered in the cold blast of the native rulers and was consumed in the fire lit up by the conquerors....This was the greatest disaster that befell the religion of Buddha in India.... The sword of Islam fell heavily upon the priestly class. It perished or it fled outside India. Nobody remained to keep the flame of Buddhism burning (Ambedkar 1987: 232–33).

Some Questions

There are puzzling aspects, sometimes contradictory, to all these interpretations. If, for instance, Buddhism, through its monasteries

and commercial orientation, was encouraging capitalism, why should it be overwhelmed by a Brahmanism that mainly functioned to extend agricultural production? By all accounts, the mode of production fostered by Brahmanism was more backward, more feudal, less commercial and urban-oriented, more ritualised: why in an era of expanding world trade should it have come to dominate in India? Why a historical process that is apparently a step backward to a form of agriculture-centered production? This is, in part, a question about the nature of 'feudalism' in India, and also whether the hegemony achieved by Brahmanism in the last half of the first millennium really represented a step backward in socio-economic terms.

As to why Brahmanism could triumph, there are further questions. First, did monastery-centered Buddhism by the middle of the millennium represent a 'decadent' or 'exploitative' social phenomena that gave nothing significant in exchange for the surplus it appropriated? Second, did its lack of ritualism or daily life ceremonies leave openings that Brahmanism could fill? If neither explanation holds, then what others can be given?

There are inconsistencies in the analysis of the role of the monasteries. If they were really centers of clever commercial organising and banking, then they were not simply parasitic and unproductive. And, if monasteries drew peasants away from their 'productive' (i.e., exploited) life in society, that meant they provided an outlet for escape, an alternative power center to state tyranny—this would suggest a reason for the political ruling classes to be hostile to them, but then this doesn't square with the notion that they simply were an exploitative burden on the peasantry. More nuanced descriptions of Chinese society reveal fluctuations in the role of monasteries: though they had become exploitative at the end of the millennium, they played an important entrepreneurial role earlier, and at many periods they provided crucial support in the forms of grain and other charity to peasants (Wright 1965: 58–59; Lai 1995). Kosambi himself has, as we noted in Chapter 4, described the entrepreneurial role of monasteries in supporting trade and helping to extend agricultural production. Descriptions by Chinese travellers indicate that the monasteries often did provide a life of comfort, and sometimes luxury, that might well have lead to hostility from sections of the masses or non-Buddhist elites—but it is also true that at the same time they provided services, both

educational and medical. It is clear that the religious and socio-economic role of monasteries varied significantly from time to time and at this point no simple generalisations are possible.

Hsuan Tsang's account of thousands of monasteries does not add up to a very large proportion of the population; and it is only in the case of Nalanda that he indicates much luxury and service to the monks. This might be compared to the infrastructure surrounding the research of a large university today, but it does not necessarily describe the typical mode of existence in the monasteries. The fact that Brahmanism was more decentralised does not mean the system required less of the surplus, only that the Buddhist monasteries provided a more visible religious establishment. It would indeed be biased to argue that the Buddhist monasteries were any more 'unproductive' or parasitical than Brahmanic priests who lived off of the innumerable gifts from believers. In fact, the huge temple complexes and the divinisation of kings that marked the Brahmanic revival between the 7th to 8th centuries required a tremendous requisitioning of surplus.

To say that Buddhism offered nothing to lay believers in comparison with the innumerable ritual ties binding Brahman priests and non-Brahman householders evades one crucial issue: there was a difference in principle between what Brahmanism and Buddhism taught for lay believers. Buddhism actively contested the highly ritualised life-cycle ceremonies prescribed by Brahmanism, emphasising instead righteous conduct, and seeking actively to displace both the Vedic sacrifice and the newly developing rituals. This does not mean that it offered nothing for the religious and ritual needs of lay followers. There were simple rituals and forms of participation by lay followers in monastic life. Buddhist devotionalism under Mahayana especially served popular emotional needs (this is clear for Chinese society, as Whalen Lai shows). Brahmanism's ability to coexist with and absorb local cults (where often only the elites interpreted local deities as an avatar of Vishnu or a form of Shiva) is well-attested, but Buddhism did the same in many south-east Asian countries and we have evidence that Buddhism also was appropriating various cults of local gods and goddess through much of the period in India as well.

Finally, we know rather little about the actual rituals and culture of the masses in this period. Basham's expressed certainties that Buddhist families used Brahman priests and followed Vedic rituals

ignores the fact that this could have been true only of the elite. Among the masses of people, certainly, ritual practices and ceremonies differed from those of traditional Brahmanism, as they do even today.

Historiographical Questions

One of the most important objections to all the facile generalisations made about the decline of Buddhism in India is the lack of historical evidence. This is a general problem of ancient Indian history. Looked at in comparison with such societies as China, the difference is almost shocking. Except for reports of outsiders (the occasional Greek, or Chinese traveller) and what is indirectly available in literature, there are no social descriptions of the period. Buddhist literature, which gives such descriptions, was wiped out of India: not a single Buddhist text, whether in Pali or Sanskrit, was preserved in India! Today's references to this literature draw on manuscripts preserved in Sri Lanka, Tibet and China.

The closest thing to existing Indian 'histories' preserved in India are the *itihasa-puranas*, which were basically lists of kings of dynasties, composed after the 8th century but referring only to kings ruling before the 3rd century CE. They are based in north India and derived from Brahmanic texts (the *vamsavalis* or 'genealogies' and *charitas* or 'biographies') which sought to legitimize the status of kings (Wink 1990: 282–83). Romila Thapar has defended the use of these *itihasa-puranas* by arguing that the historical tradition of Indian society can be culled from such literature. However, in effect she confirms their biases. Early India had its bards and chroniclers, known as *sutas* and *magadhas*, who kept records of events and sang of the glory of kings as happens in every society. However, the bards were treated as low and 'mixed' jatis by the Brahmanic *dharmasashtras*, and since their chronicles and songs were in Prakrit, these were lost, and only after the 4th century CE was some of this material absorbed by the Brahman elite as it was transferred into (rewritten in) Sanskrit for the *puranas* (Thapar 1979: 238–40). Thus, the *itihas* tradition that developed not only used an orthodox Brahmanic perspective in treating genealogies; its writers also had a clear interest in covering up the origins of many of the ruling families, which were 'low' in varna terms or even

'barbarian' according to Brahmanic ideology. Aside from these Brahmanic (and other orthodox social and philosophical) texts and also the material provided from outside, Indian history up until the time of the Turks and Mughals has to be reconstructed largely from evidence of inscriptions, coins, and archaeological excavations. It is a strange situation for a society whose elite prides itself on its literary and intellectual skills.

A more genuine historical tradition requires both a sense of scepticism and loyalty to empirical reality, and an organisational or institutional independence from the rulers themselves. China had one of the most developed historical traditions; however biased, these recorded the action of rulers and sometimes their subjects during the dynasties themselves. Though 'history' was not an early 'science' in Buddhism as it was in China, still Buddhism did foster a historical approach: the early Pali texts show an orientation to a fairly sober description of historical events, and the monasteries were institutions of potentially great autonomy. In fact, Sri Lanka, a Buddhist society, did produce two important historical chronicles which add to our knowledge of early India. It is quite striking that only the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka give an account of India's greatest emperor, Asoka; the Brahmanic sources barely mention his name. The single example of a similar chronicle in India is the *Rajatarangini* of Kashmir, written in the 12th century under king Jayasimha, which may have been influenced by Buddhism (Thapar 1979: 243–44; Kosambi 1985: 116n).

Thapar's defends the use of Brahmanical sources with the argument that 'every society has a concept of its past and therefore no society can be called ahistorical' (1979: 238). This does not come to grips with the fact that what is preserved in India has been the Brahmanical 'concept of its past' and not that of a nebulous 'society'. The concept of the past as revealed in Brahmanical sources is quite different from the one revealed in Buddhist sources, not to mention those of other Indian traditions or preliterate indigenous groups within India. Moreover, the very different conceptions of the past embodied in Buddhist literature have been erased in India itself.

We can well believe that quite a lot of literature, including chronicles, must have been available once. But mostly Buddhist records, whether chronicles, popular works, sacred texts, vernacular versions of the Chinese and Tibetan translations from Sanskrit, that

we now have, must have been kept in the monasteries—and lost when the monasteries were destroyed. Such records must have existed; they formed the basis for the Pali texts, for instance, which were preserved in Sri Lanka, as well as for Tibetan, Chinese and other translations of Buddhist literature. Taranatha, the early 17th century Tibetan chronicler of Buddhist Indian history, refers to manuscripts he relied on that are not known today. The disappearance of Buddhism from India also has meant the disappearance of some of the most valuable Indian historiography, and a deep Brahmanic bias in the existing records.

It is important to realise that this constitutes a large gap in the overall history of Indian society. This history is not simply, as Kosambi asserts, a record of the successive changes in the means and relations of production (Kosambi 1975: 1); it is, like all history, a record of human actions and human relationships as they change and develop through time. These are related to changing modes of production but cannot be identified with these. These human actions and relationships are precisely what we know little about. To take only one example of how this is relevant and not simply to those concerned about Buddhism as such, we can take the question of gender. One of the results of the domination of Brahmanic literature is the complete ignoring of the role of queens and matrilineal monarchies in many parts of ancient India. For example, the Satavahanas in Maharashtra and Andhra, and their Iksvaku successors in Andhra, were matrilineal. Judging from inscriptional evidence, Satavahana queens like Nayanika and Gotami Bala-siri, and Iksvaku queens such as Camti-siri and Bhati-Deva were powerful and important people, some of whom may even have been the active rulers at times. Mirashi's presentation of the Satavahana inscriptions in Devanagari transcription (especially Mirashi 1981, II: 5–20) and Dutt's description of the role of Iksvaku royal women as revealed in Nagarjunakonda ruins (1988: 128–31), as well as Mahayana texts such as the *Srimalasimhanada Sutra* show this. However, such women are not mentioned at all in the Puranic sources and so have been left out of the normal historians' accounts of India (e.g. Thapar 1996; Sastri 1999). Mirashi ignores his own evidence to assert it was impossible that women should have had so much power (Mirashi 1981, II: 4–16, 34n, 41–49).

This situation itself puts a large question mark on all the generalisations we have seen about the decline of Buddhism in India.

The Question of Violence

What about the role of force and violence in the disappearance of Buddhism from India? The 'Hindutva' forces, so powerful in India today, make much of the argument that historically Hinduism has been a tolerant religion, absorbing and co-opting its opponents rather than using force against them, and they, in contrast, depict Islam as a violent, prosyletising religion. This argument fails when we consider the problem of historical evidence. Those who sack monasteries and kill monks or their lay supporters do not leave evidence of their crimes! Consider how much would be known, for example, about the attacks on and murders of Indian Christians and missionaries in Adivasi areas during the period 1999–2000, if it had not been for the world-wide Christian connections and the modern mass media?

That Brahmanism was not tolerant of 'heretics'(*pashandas*) is quite clear from the Sanskrit sources themselves. The story of Rama killing Shambuk is symbolic of violence exerted both against 'low' castes who overstepped their role and against 'heretical ascetics'. The *Arthashastra* is quite specific in classifying the samana sects along with untouchables: 'Heretics and Candalas shall stay in land allotted to them beyond the cremation ground' (*Arthasastra* 1992: 193). More specifically, Kautalya says, in Rangarajan's translation, 'Ascetics who live in *ashramas* and *Pashandas* [who live in reserved areas] shall do so without annoying each other; they shall put up with minor irritations. Those who are already living in an area shall make room for newcomers; any one who objects to giving room shall be expelled'. The passage makes it clear that *pashandas* were forced into something like 'reservations'.

The *Arthashastra*'s general orientation suggests that Buddhists were looked upon as being equivalent to untouchables; and a Maharashtra historian, B.G. Gokhale, makes a similar point when he notes that Buddhists in the late period in Maharasthra were targets of a resurgent Brahmanism, noting that locally at Ellora and elsewhere some of their units were known as Dhedwada and Maharwada (Gokhale 1976: 118). It is not without reason that 19th and 20th century Dalit leaders such as Ambedkar and Iyothee Thass argued that Dalits were descendents of Buddhists who had been transformed into untouchables by Brahmans.

As Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's study of the Gupta period puranas makes clear, Brahmanical attitudes towards *pashandas* hardened over time. Tolerance in the period of the Upanishads and Asoka turned into a prescription for murder in the puranas. As the *Linga Purana* describes in its version of history, the Dharma was distroyed because of the Buddha-avatar, a 'chastiser' was born called Pramitra who 'destroyed barbarians by the thousands and killed all the kings who were born of Sudras, and cut down the heretics.... At the age of 32 he set out, and for 20 years he killed all creatures by the hundreds and thousands, until the cruel act reduced the earth to nothing but ashes' (O'Flaherty 1983: 123). The version she cites from the *Matsya Purana* is equally stark:

> Those who were unrighteous—he killed them all: those in the north and in the central country, and the mountain people, the inhabitants of the east and the west, those in the area of the highlands of the Vindhyas, and those in the Deccan, and the Dravidians and Sinhalas, the Gandharas and Paradas, the Pahlavas and Yavanas and Sakas, Tusakas, Barbaras, Svetas, Halikas, Darada, Khasas, Lampakas, Andhras and the races of the Cola. Turning the wheel of conquest, the powerful one put an end to the Sudras, putting all creatures to flight....

O'Flaherty thus calls the *Matsya Purana, Vayu Purana, Brahmananda Purana, Vishnu Purana* and *Bhagwat Purana* 'the basic scriptures of Gupta paranoia and insecurity' (ibid.: 124). In fact, Brahmanic paranoia would be more accurate, since as she makes clear, Gupta practice was actually quite tolerant.[3]

Buddhist sources point more specifically to a great deal of violence in the millennial-long conflict of Buddhism and Brahmanism. Hsuan Tsang, for example, gives many stories of violence, including the well-known story of the Shaivite king Sashanka cutting down the Bodhi tree, breaking memorial stones, and attempting to destroy other images (Beal 1983: II, 91, 118, 121). He also mentions a great

[3] O'Flaherty shows that the myth of the Buddha as an avatar of Visnu was linked to the instigation of kings to destroy them as heretics. Another version of this was the story of the destruction of Buddhists by four Kshatriyas born of a fire ceremony in the *Bhavisya Purana*. Later in Muslim times, these 'fire-born' Kshatriyas were identified as Rajputs with similar story that they were created to oppose Buddhist 'traitors' as well as Muslims and Christian *mlecchas* (Hiltebeitel 2001: 278–81).

monumental cave-temple construction in a mountainous area in Vidarbha, said to have been done by the Satavahana king under the instigation of Nagarjuna, that was totally destroyed (ibid.: 214–17).

The late 16th century and early 17th century Tibetan Buddhist chronicler Taranatha describes many more incidents, referring to the 'three hostilities' against Buddhism, three periods when Buddhism was under violent attack. The first was that of Pushyamitra Shunga at the end of the Mauryan period:

> The Brahmana king Pusyamitra, along with other *tirthikas*, started war and they burned down numerous monasteries from Madhyadesa to Jalandhara. They also killed a number of vastly learned monks. But most of them fled to other countries. As a result, within five years the Doctrine was extinct in the north (*Taranatha* 1990: 121).

The 'second hostility' appears to be that of Mihirakula (the fiercely anti-Buddhist king who raided north India in the 6th century), though Taranatha does not use the name and instead says a 'Persian' king destroyed Magadha with a Turuska army, ruined many temples and damaged Nalanda. The 'third hostility' had appears in the south, with less overt reliance on state power; it describes two Brahman beggars, one of whom gains magical powers to start a fire that consumes 84 temples and huge numbers of valuable documents in the country of Krishnaraja (*Taranatha* 1990: 138, 141–42).

When fierce debates with Brahmanic pandits began to take place, these were often marked by violence. In Orissa, writes Taranatha, after one debate

> the *tirthikas* became victorious and destroyed many temples of the insiders. They robbed in particular the centers for the Doctrine and took away the *deva-dasas* [vihara slaves]....[Many debates were lost in the south and] as a result, there were many incidents of the property and followers of the insiders being robbed by the *tirthika* Brahmans (*Taranatha* 1990: 226).

Finally, while Turks destroyed Vikramasila and Odantapura in the 12th century, it is noted that this happened because they had mistaken them for forts and in fact the king had stationed soldiers there (*Taranatha* 1990: 318–19): the Turks made a simple mistake!

This destruction is taken as the final blow and marks the end of Taranatha's chronicle, as monks fled from there to Nepal, to the south-west of India, and to south-east Asia.[4]

Violence in history is easily forgotten. A major example in India may be the Kalinga war, which is attested to by Asoka's own inscriptions. Visiting the country of Kalinga in the 7th century, Hsuan Tsang described it as once having a dense population but then being depopulated, but gave as explanation only a story about a fabulous rishi who cursed the people. In the plethora of Buddhist legends about Asoka, which stress his wickedness before the conversion, the devastating results of his own major war were not included.

The ravages of time have also played a role in erasing the Buddhist heritage of India. The glory of Ajanta's paintings could survive until British times simply because the cave region was so inaccessible, while other monuments were simply buried—until recovery in the 19th and 20th century led to a new process of theft (with important relics ending up in European museums or private collections), destruction due to failures in maintenance including the failure of the Archaeological Survey of India today! (Menon 2001; Kalidas 2001).[5]

In the end, the patronage of kings was important both for Buddhism and Brahmanism, and the gradual conversion of kings to Brahmanic ideology proved decisive. Rulers gave financial support to Brahmans, took the responsibility of enforcing varna laws and discriminating against 'heretical' sects, and refused state protection to their persons and property—if they did not actively murder and loot them themselves.

Buddhists philosophised this decline; the notion of constant change was after all a major theme. The idea that the Dhamma

[4] A recent book, by Richard Eaton (2000: 94–132) points out that of the sixty thousand-odd cases of temple destruction by Muslim rulers cited by contemporary Hindutva sources one may identify only eighty instances 'whose historicity appears to be reasonably certain'. He also makes it clear that Hindu kings raided Hindu kingdoms, destroyed temples and captured idols; Muslim rulers committed atrocities against Muslims. His conclusion is that almost all cases of violence were primarily political, i.e., to establish symbolic as well as real power.

[5] Of course, restoration techniques are also improving, and Indians and 'foreign' advisors are learning from each other.

would fade with time can be seen in Taranatha, who notes in regard to Pushyamitra Shunga that 'as predicted, the first 500 years constituted the period of the flourish of the Law of the Teacher, and the next 500 years the period of its decay' (*Taranatha* 1990: 121) and writes that 'by the influence of time, the Law was also not as bright as before.' Thus Taranatha's own interpretation is often one that simply sees a natural process of decay, interpreted with periodic re-establishment of the Dhamma by brilliant Bodhisattvas and teachers. His very way of telling stories of constant destruction and recovery of manuscripts and teachings suggests the fundamental transitoriness taught by Buddhism. At the same time, also shown in the stories is a many-levelled, fierce and often violent conflict at the social level.

The Alliance Between Brahmans and Kings

The strength behind the Brahmanical revival was royal patronage (for an almost identical argument see Weber 1996: 130). Whatever influence the growing Vaishnava or Shaivite cults, (and not all expressions of these were within the framework of Brahmanism) began to exert within 'society', state power was crucial. It was ultimately the kings who enforced either the exclusivist Brahmanic *varnashrama dharma* or the tolerant Buddhist Dhamma. After Ashoka, up to the 7th century or so, most kings patronised both religions—which was encouraged by Buddhism, discouraged by Brahmanism—and we have no very certain historical knowledge about how many very fervent Buddhist kings (or queens) there may have been. Most rulers were probably opportunistic. However, it is a striking fact that most of the new regional dynasties in India that arose after the 7th and 8th centuries—the Karkotas and Pratiharas of the north, the Rashtrakutas of the Deccan, and the Pandyas and Pallavas of the south—were supporters of Brahmanism and established centralised state cults focusing on Hindu image worship. The sole exception was the Pala dynasty in Bengal (about 750 CE—1161 CE). It was this royal patronage that proved decisive in the defeat of Buddhism.

A key aspect of this patronage was the famous land grants, which began to become prominent by the 6th century and then

expanded rapidly; these grants were most often made to Brahman settlers. While Kosambi emphasises their economic function and interprets these gifts as resulting from the technological knowledge the Brahmans provided for extending cultivation, the more likely motivation was political. Peasants themselves possessed the technological knowledge for agriculture; what they did not have, and Brahmans did, was access to the sacred texts that legitimized kings and provided a basis of knowledge for education. The *shastras* allowed the Brahmans who studied them, as Herman Kulke has noted, 'a command of a considerable body of knowledge on state administration and political economy' (Kulke 1997: 237).

Brahmans were more of a political specialists than technical specialists. From this group came not only priests, but also councillors, administrators and clerical staff for the kingdoms. They helped the establishment of local administration, not only by running the administration themselves in the villages they received in grants, but also by providing resources to help royal administration in surrounding villages in the same locality. At the higher level they provided legitimacy by creating genealogies and origin mythologies identifying the kings as Kshatriyas and organising impressive ceremonial functions that invested the king with all the paraphernalia and mystique of Hindu royalty; at the lower level they propagandised the mystique of social supremacy and political power. They taught the population, they established ritual and priestly relations with the prominent households of the region, they promulgated caste and the rights of kings. In contrast to the Buddhist monasteries, they provided no social structures and no ideologies that could facilitate revolt.

In contrast to Buddhism and Jainism, Brahmanism offered kings very unencumbered benefits. Brahmanism offered them status and legitimacy without making any moral demands on them. The very extravagance of the depiction of self-sacrificing kings in the traditions of Buddhism and Jainism shamed those who were not inclined to meet this ideal. The Tamil epic *Silapaddikaram*, for instance, is full of stories of kings who simply died because of their moral transgressions; its central story revolves around the death of the king and queen and the near-destruction of the great city of Madurai, because of kingly injustice. Such stories also gave legitimacy to popular resistance to royal injustice. If we contrast this with Manu's description of the divinity of kings and his depiction

of the *danda*, the ability to punish, as central to the concept of rulership, the attraction of Brahmanism for kings will be clear. Buddhist kings were expected to behave morally in their own lives and to be just and generous towards their subjects. Kings accepting Brahmanism were only expected to enforce the caste system. This would ensure that their use of power could be confirmed, just as the rich could be confirmed in their accumulation of riches, without any need to limit this by ethical considerations.

At the organisational level, Buddhism tended to draw its monks away from direct social and political involvement, including involvement in the service of kings. While the Sangha in many societies (Thailand, Sri Lanka and even China) did provide ideological and material support to rulers,[6] its autonomy and potentiality for providing a base of opposition in comparison to the very diffuseness of Brahmanism marked it as a threat. Thus, ideologically, socially and organisationally Brahmanism in a narrow self-interested sense, proved more useful to Indian kings, than Buddhism. That it militated against a stronger political consolidation at an all-India level, and politically weakened Indian society in crucial ways, is a different matter.

The Role of Islam

Almost all historians see the invasion of the Turks, signifying the advent of Islam as a ruling power in India, as dealing the final blow to Buddhism in India. The reality, as we have seen, was much more complex. To view 'Muslims' uniquely as destroyers and looters of monasteries and temples in contrast to people of other religions (e.g. 'Hindus') is an erroneous concept, a product of the Hindutva ideology that began to take shape in 19th century India. Conquerors, of every religion and race, have always tended to loot and destroy; and the symbols of the culture, wealth and power of the conquered have always been a major object of such destruction. Pre-modern rulers, whatever be their religion or race, have normally discriminated to some degree or another against people of

[6] Whalen Lai's survey of Buddhism in China indicates that at certain periods even monks played a crucial role as advisors in war time (Lai 1995: 284–89).

other religions and races, often ghettoising them and occasionally, depending on the economic–political situation, used violence against them. Notions of 'jihad', the 'just war', the subjugation of the *mleccha* and various other ways of vanquishing 'evil' ideology and people from the opponent, groups have pervaded all religions, Buddhism perhaps less than others. Rulers of all religions, similarly, have allowed people of other religions to live within their territories, particularly if these have some social and economic strength. The degree of rights (more accurately, privileges) versus ghettoisation and discrimination has normally depended on non-religious factors.

Islam in these respects has been little different from other major religions. Had Buddhism been sufficiently strong both economically and socially at the time of conquest, Buddhists would have been treated much as 'Hindus' were treated. On the whole, Islam's record of tolerance in premodern times, in regard to Christian, Jewish and 'Hindu' inhabitants of territories ruled by Muslims has been as good as other religions. In this sense, Ambedkar as well as distinguished historians like Basham fell into a Hindutva conceptual trap in blaming Islam.

However, some religious and ideological factors were involved that helped make 'the sword of Islam' if not the 'greatest disaster', a major blow for Buddhism in India. Buddhism and Islam were competitors at a level very different from the relations between Islam and Brahmanism. Both were universal religions, drawing their adherents from all ethnic groups and all countries. Both were missionary religions, not confining themselves to a geographic territory, sending out their teachers and preachers to win over all men and women to the true doctrine. Both were connected with commerce and trade—the Muslim trading network in fact superseded the Buddhist trading network that linked India with Rome, Persia, Greece and Africa to the west and through central Asia to China in the east. In the west, the confrontation between Islam and Christianity led to bitter wars. Buddhism discouraged militarism more than either Islam or Christianity, yet the confrontation was no less profound, not because of their difference, but because of their similarities.

Brahmanism did not offer the same kind of challenge to Islam. It did not seek converts. Brahmans also were probably not too concerned if significant numbers of low caste or frontier people turned to Islam as long as their heartland areas were not challenged; and

they could learn to live with *mleccha* rulers if these were willing to enforce the *varnashrama dharma*. Ironically, the alliance of Brahmans with Muslim rulers (and later with British colonial rule) was almost as effective as it was with officially 'Hindu' kings.

Wink's massive study, *Al-Hind*, notes the long-standing dominance of Buddhism, and suggests that it was only gradually, and with the support of kings, was it superseded by Brahmanism. This in turn was linked with the external dominance of Islam:

> As the inscriptional sources throughout India make clear it was the power of the kings which was decisive in the restoration of the new brahmanical order. Brahmanism, culminating in the cults of Shiva and Vishnu under the patronage of regionally entrenched kings, with huge stone temples clustering in newly arising regional capitals which accommodated peripatetic courts, and sendentarization and settlement of nomadic or mobile groups, accompanied by agricultural intensification—this was the 'vertical' pattern which, with its more solid forms, descended on the open-ended world of the itinerant trader and the Buddhist monk.

But, he adds, this did not mean that trade disappeared; rather the 'increasing density of regional economies was a function of India's increased role in world trade', a role that now took place under the aegis of the Muslims, the hegemonic commercial civilisation of the age. 'This entire development is unthinkable without the new cosmopolitan religion of Islam superseding Buddhism at the same time that the 'brahmanical restoration' takes place' (Wink 1990: 230).

Why did this happen? Wink stresses the connection between the rise and fall of Indian kingdoms and external trade links, especially with the Arab-dominated trade to the west, and with a resurgent China to the east. The 'medieval' period in India was one of an intensification of agriculture, however the deepening of regional economies was related to a world trade, dominated by Islam. Brahmanised regional kingdoms could hope to achieve all-India hegemony only through alliances with Muslim and other external powers.

Wink's historical survey shows some of these processes in his review of the dynasties that dominated India in the last half of the first millennium. The first was the Karkota dynasty in Kashmir, which began early in the 7th century, dominated trade routes to the west and to Rome, and made an alliance with the Chinese who

were concerned about Muslims as well as the challenge from a growing Tibetan power. It was on the basis of this alliance and by using soldiers recruited from central Asia and the Punjab that the Karkota king, Lalitaditya, embarked on a 'world conquest', or *digvijay*, of India between 713 to 747 CE, conquering Kanauj, one-time capital of Harsha, then moving through Orissa to the gulf of Bengal, then to the Deccan and Konkan, returned through Gujarat to Kashmir. This event is seen by many historians as being the turning point from the 'classical' to the 'medieval' period of India. And with the amassment of huge wealth, Lalitaditya was able to build shrines, monuments and temples, including a huge temple to the sun at Martanda that marked the revival of Brahmanism in Kashmir (ibid.: 237–54).

Following this the Palas of Bengal came to dominate in the second half of the 8th century. The most powerful ruler was Dharmapala (769–815 CE), who ruled Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Nepal and Assam, and also brought Kanauj under his control. For the first time, the historic lands of Buddhism were conquered from the east. From the west, the Arabs advanced into Sind, while Tibet arose as a new power and the Tang dynasty came to control in China. These factors conditioned predominance of the Palas. In contrast to the other rulers, the Palas all throughout their rule were major supporters of Buddhism, though they also patronized Saivism and Vaisnavism and supported Brahman migration from the Kanauj area. It was under them that the crucial monastic university of Vikramsila attained importance, and it was through Bengal that Buddhism was taken up in Tibet. The full-scale upsurge of Brahmanism came later with the Senas (1097–1223), the migrant warriors from Karnataka in south India who were fierce Shaivites, and sponsored Hindu cults throughout Bengal (ibid.: 259–72; see also Eaton 1997: 9–16).

The next crucial rulers, according to Wink, were the Gurjara-Pratiharas, who had emerged in north Gujarat and Rajasthan and were indigenous pastoral and hunting groups as well as some immigrant Hunas. These groups later formed the Rajputs, who went on to become the typical landed gentry and recognised 'Kshatriyas' of north India. With them the ancient Brahman–Kshatriya antagonisms, symbolised in the story of Parashuram killing off all the Kshatriyas, were soon replaced by a symbiotic relationship, as the Rajputs became the focus of a new Brahman-controlled mythologising. They became the

guardians of Brahmanic orthodoxy, but they were landlocked, with their capital centered at Kanauj and therefore were unable to achieve true hegemony (Wink 1990: 276–92).

The Rashtrakutas who controlled Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, from the late 8th to the 10th century, were described by the Arabs as the true paramount rulers of India. Their greatest ruler Krishnaraja I (CE 738–773) was the builder of the fabulous rock-cut Kailasha temple, a monument that symbolised a takeover of the cave-temple heritage of the Buddhists and Jains. They gained power due to the favourable position of Gujarat in the maritime trade with the Islamic world, and their rise paralleled the expansion of this trade (ibid.: 303–09).

Finally, the Cholas of Tamil Nadu became dominant throughout India, in the late 10th and 11th centuries. They based their power on brahman-occupied villages and, again, on huge temple complexes symbolising royal divinity, such as the Rajeshwari temple (ibid.: 231). Bhakti movements, both of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, spread during their time, fighting and replacing to a large degree the 'heretic' religions of Buddhism and Jainism. The rise of the Cholas was linked to the economic advance of China in the Sung era and the tremendous expansion of trade it involved. The Cholas also expanded into southeast Asia, where Brahman-dominated courts similarly emerged, though there most of the population retained a loyalty to Buddhism. They were an exception to the general exclusion of Indians from active role in seafaring and trade (ibid.: 311–34).

'Round and round the mandala' is how John Keay has described the power shifts and rather meaningless conquests of the era (Keay 2000: 167). The common features of these kingdoms were decentralised and 'feudalised' administration, shifting hierarchies of all-India control, the sponsorship of elaborate and magnificent temple complexes proclaiming the glories of both kings and Brahmans, and access to outside trade as a major source of power and surplus. At the village level, with the spread of agriculture, there was an increasing proliferation of artisan and service jatis (castes), in contrast to the earlier guilds, and whole villages of carpenters, weavers and such like depicted in the Jatakas. Numerous village temples featured local gods and goddesses now identified with Vishnu, Shiva or other 'Great Tradition' deities. Their worship and wealth were controlled by priests who were largely Brahmans. The castes

of untouchables, as we known them today, began to make their appearance, serving as leather-workers, butchers, and field labourers. The proud status of farmer-householders as *gahapatis* vanished; now the leading landholders of the village sought to depict themselves as Kshatriyas or else were condemned to the inferior position of Shudras. While trade linkages with the outside world continued, they were now largely (except for eastern India) controlled by merchants of non-Indian communities, Arabs and others. India became ingrown.

Muslim Conversion

The large majority of Muslims found in the Indian subcontinent by the British were not descendents of immigrants, whether Turks or Mongols or Arabs by origin, but descendents of converted Indians. Why the conversion took place has been a matter of intense interest, to Indians themselves as well as to scholars.

In his recent study of Islam in Bengal, Richard Eaton describes 'four conventional theories' which he calls: (1) the 'Religion of the Sword' thesis (forcible conversion), (2) the 'Royal Patronage' thesis (self-interested conversion for the benefits of being Muslim under a Muslim king); the 'Religion of Social Liberation' thesis (Islam being an equalitarian religion attracted low-caste converts fleeing the oppressions of Brahmanic varnasrama society); and (4) the immigrant thesis. The first two he rejects on the grounds that the mass of poorer Muslims are found not at the centers of Muslim rule, where both force and patronage would have been of greater significance, but in the northeast and northwest, at the peripheries. However, he also rejects the Social Liberation thesis, arguing that most of the mass converts had never really been Hindus. They were basically hunting, fishing, gathering peoples who went directly from a tribal culture to that of Islam. Most of these tribes such as the Rajbansi, Pod, Candal, Kuch and other indigenous groups had been only lightly exposed to Brahmanic culture. Eaton argues instead that in Bengal the converts came mainly from the eastern areas which had not been settled into cultivation or 'Hinduised'. Islam in Bengal was thus identified with the expansion of cultivation (Eaton 1997: 118). And he adds, rather sarcastically, that the Social Liberation thesis attributes

'present-day values to peoples of the past' by presupposing that they had a desire for equality:

> Before their contact with Muslims, India's lower castes are thought to have possessed, almost as though familiar with the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Thomas Jefferson, some innate notion of the fundamental equality of all humankind denied them by an oppressive Brahmanic tyranny (ibid.: 117).

Eaton does not give a name to his own thesis, but since he implies that the mass of lower-class Indian Muslims came directly from 'tribal' origins, from people outside the reach of the Brahmanic caste system, we could call it the 'Tribe to Muslim' thesis.

However, if we look at the situation in Bengal, in particular at the time of the Muslim conquest, this thesis does not seem to hold. In spite of the centuries-long upsurge of Brahmanism in India, it was slow to capture eastern India. In Bengal itself the strongholds of Buddhism were in south and east Bengal, in the kingdoms whose sea-ports provided links with the flourishing trade with the Buddhist-influenced kingdoms of southeast Asia. This area saw less Brahman migration as compared to that in west Bengal. But Brahmanisation cannot be simply identified with agricultural settlement. Eastern and northern Bengal, as reported by Hsuan Tsang, were well-cultimated regions. It seems likely, then, that though Islam did help in the extension of agriculture, it did not initiate it; a large section of the masses must have been cultivators before conversion.

Here the interesting question arises once again: who were the Candalas? Bengal is the only state that had an untouchable caste called Candalas at the time of the British (in fact they organised a strong social movement, calling themselves Namasudras). As Eaton points out, the mass of indigenous people in Bengal were probably 'Proto-Munda' speakers, i.e. using an Austro-Asiatic language that as it went towards the east became mixed with Indo-Aryan and Dravidian forms. The word 'Candal' was used, as we pointed out, for people not simply in the east but also in the *madhyadesha* or Gangetic plains as well as central India. It is also strikingly similar to the name of a Mundari-speaking 'scheduled tribe' today, the Santhals. It seems a reasonable hypothesis, then, to argue that these proto-Munda speakers spread from Bengal into central India and also into some regions of the Gangetic plains. As the hegemony of Brahmanism was consolidated, those who could be dominated and

conquered became known as 'Candalas' and were treated as untouchable, in spite of their resistance which those in more hilly and remote areas could remain independent. There may well have been some 'collective consciousness', nurtured by teachers and traditions, spreading from the 'Candalas' in the more central areas of India to the east. In the east many of these groups must have provided support for Buddhism, where they learned an equalitarian high tradition. Taranatha tells the story of a chieftain of eastern Bengal whose son studying in a Brahman school was

> beaten up by Brahman boys saying 'You are born in a low family.' When he asked the reason for this, they said, 'Being a Buddhist Tantrika your father gave the Sudra queen a higher status and, while worshipping, he does not distinguish between the low and high castes and allows them to mix (*Taranatha* 1990: 291).

These 'indigenous' people, who were by no means simple 'tribals', did not need to read Rousseau or Jefferson to learn values of equality; they learned it from Buddhist traditions. Once Buddhism was decisively out of power in India and there was no support for escaping discrimination, it is understandable that they would have turned to a religion that, though drastically different in so many ways, also had egalitarian traditions (however much they were modified by medieval hierarchicalism). Those who became Muslim became known simply as Muslim cultivators (or weavers or whatever); though they were treated in caste-like ways, they were never untouchables. Those of who, for whatever reasons, did not convert, or were powerless to identify themselves with the Muslim community, were categorised as 'Candals' or 'Kaivartas' (fishermen castes) and the like. In spite of Eaton's prize-winning scholarship, the Social Liberation thesis stands.

The Nature of Indian Feudalism

Finally, we return to the important question of whether Brahmanic hegemony meant a step forward or backward in terms of advancing forces of production and human betterment. There is no question that in terms of human values of equality, rationality and non-violence, Buddhism fostered a higher form of society. In the Chapter 4 we argued that, beginning in the first millennium BCE

and continuing for centuries after that when India was a major force in global trade and development. It also fostered a dynamic and open commercial society that meant a relative advance in the development of productive forces.

But what was the economic impact of hegemony of Brahmanism? In part, this question has been debated within India in terms of the issue of 'feudalism'. While Kosambi's version of feudalism stressed the relations of dependence that came to develop between overlords and subsidiaries, the contributions of a later Marxist historian, R.S. Sharma, have also emphasised relative economic backwardness: demonetisation and some stagnation of production, a turning inward, and an enserfment of most the peasantry (Sharma 1997: 48–85). There has been a vigorous historical debate on this issue, which has provided the context for Andre Wink's intervention. Wink connects the resurgence of Brahmanic orthodoxy, beginning around the 7th century, with the Muslim impact by relating the varying fates of the new regional kingdoms of India with external alliances and stressing the role of Arab-Muslim control of world trade. However, he goes on to link this with an effort to disprove the 'feudalisation' thesis. He argues that demonetisation within India itself did not take place because in many cases Arab coinage replaced it. He stresses the way in which the Arabs in the 9th and 10th centuries saw India as a land of tremendous wealth and who described the Rashtrakuta king as the fourth richest in the world and as 'king of kings' in India (Wink 1990: 219–31). This according to him is sufficient to argue against Sharma's and the feudalism thesis. He argues instead that there was a 'deepening' of the regional economies, an extension of agriculture, a continuing expansion of trade even if its coinage was provided by outsiders, and a 're-urbanisation' which was 'more solid' than the world 'of the itinerant trader and Buddhist monk' (ibid.: 230). The picture is one of Buddhism as supporting a more extended, shallow, less economically developed society, while the Brahmanism/Islam combination was connected with economic advancement.

However, trade in the earlier period was hardly that of 'itinerant' traders; it was extensive and organised. The 'deepening' of the new regional economies could be called, in other terminology, 'agricultural involution' —a weakening of commercial ties, a gradual stagnation in enterprise and innovation. Sharma is right about this aspect of feudalism, though he does not link it with the conflict

between Brahmanism and Buddhism. The wealthy subcontinent with its many kingdoms, as reported by the Arabs in the 9th and 10th centuries, had emerged after a long period of economic development influenced by Buddhism—and many of these kingdoms were to fall prey, before long, to new vigorous invaders whose rule was significantly different from that of earlier 'barbarians' absorbed into Brahmanic hierarchies. Trade linkages continued, but Indian merchants no longer played a role in them; they were takers of external trade, not its makers. The contrast with the vigorous economic growth and political consolidation of China around the same time is striking; it is from this period that China pulls ahead of India. As Brahmanism succeeded in defeating Buddhism much more thoroughly than Confucianism ever did in China, it did so at the cost of weakening the overall economic and political capacity of Indian society.

The contrast with China can be seen in other ways. We can analyse the fate of Buddhism by comparing its relationship to Confucianism and Taoism, on the one hand, with its relationship to Brahmanism in India, on the other. Buddhism in China had its ups and downs, with periods of heavy repression and of recovery. Both Confucianism, as the ideology/religion of the elite, and Taoism, as a mass-based, mystic materialism similar to Tantra, opposed Buddhism almost as thoroughly as did Brahmanism. In China, as Whalen Lai puts it, 'the holocaust of 845' when 'the Buddhist establishment was destroyed, as the state decimated Sangha membership and confiscated its property' resulted in the major decline of Buddhism in that country, with 'no escape to a southern haven, no restoration…no popular support for a revival, and saddest of all, no rebirth of the tradition' (Lai 1995: 339). This was around the same period as the period of Brahmanical repression and triumph in India.

Similar also was the fact that the triumphant Neo-Confucianism appropriated many specifically Buddhist features (including service to the poor) while Taoism appropriated local gods and cults (Wright 1959: 93–97)—just as Brahmanism appropriated Buddhist features of non-violence and integrated locally popular deities and cults with the overall Sanskritic–Vedantic framework. Similarly, some scholars of China, like Wright, argued that Buddhism was a 'politically incompetent religion' (ibid.: 106), just as those of India, like Drekmeier, have argued that in giving a solution to

the problem of order and disintegration of tribal communities at a 'spiritual-psychological level' Buddhism had encouraged a 'withdrawal from the political'—in contrast to the 'code of governance' presumably given in the dharma of Brahmanic Hinduism (Drekmeier 1962: 294–300).

However, the differences are crucial. Buddhism did survive in China—notably, what we know as the Pure Land and Zen forms of Buddhism flourished after this time. Buddhist records survived, as did groups of people who defined themselves as Buddhists. The notion of a 'withdrawal from the political' cannot explain the dramatically different fate of Buddhism in the two societies; it cannot explain the disappearance of Buddhism in India.

It would appear that Brahmanism and Buddhism were much more in contradiction with each other than Buddhism was with Confucianism and Taoism. The crucial issue was that of social hierarchy, which for Brahmanism included caste and the *varnashrama dharma*. This could not be reconciled with Buddhism. The family-oriented culture of Confucianism also was in conflict with the universalistic ethics of Buddhism, but the differences were not so great, and the rationality of Confucianism proved something of a bridge. Confucianism fostered an elitist society, but one with enough universalistic values to allow mobility for the poor and 'low'-born, something that was anathema to Brahmanism.

Brahmanism was also able, precisely because of caste, to penetrate to lower levels of village and city society than Confucianism by itself could in China. Despite the penetration the differences and gaps remained, in that the culture and religious expression of the 'Dalit-Bahujan' masses was sharply different from that of the more Brahmanised rural and urban elites. But these masses also had their very traditions and cultures interpreted by Brahmanism; they were unable to maintain their own institutions. Almost none could become intellectuals; those who became rulers or politically and economically powerful local groups had to accept Brahmanic intellectual and social hegemony. Brahmans themselves continued to have significant economic and political, as well as cultural–religious power and constituted the single most powerful and wealthy social group, knit together by a sophisticated idelogy and wide institutional networks.

Brahmanism, in contrast to Buddhism and Islam, was inward-looking. It considered India as its 'holy' land but was fearful of

expansion, treating outside countries as those of impure barbarians, or *mlecchas*; rural and agrarian but without giving real status to agrarian producers. Its pre-eminence in India signified a new era of 'feudalism' that meant economic backwardness and the dominance of caste in society. While many sections of the masses became Muslim to identify themselves with a new, militant and egalitarian religion, for those who remained within the Brahmanic fold, a revolt against their condemnation to low status could be expressed through bhakti devotionalism. But this, as we shall see, had serious limitations.

6

After Buddhism: The Bhakti Movements

For nearly a thousand years, the bhakti or devotional movements were major religious expressions for low-caste men and women, which included some drawn from the castes considered most low, as their occupation such as working with leather or other polluting jobs made them untouchable. The leading figures of these movements are called *sant*, and the term is so close to 'saint' that there is no need for translation. They are often called 'saint-poets' because they were composers of songs and hymns. However, where Catholic saints are those recognised as such by a church hierarchy, the *sants* of the bhakti movements were devotees who were recognised not by a religious establishment, but by the people, as unusually holy or compelling figures. Therefore we will use the term *sant* here without translation.

These *sants*, mostly drawn from the masses of lower-class and lower-caste artisans and labourers have become the pioneers of paths which attracted many of the masses today to some form of 'Hinduism'. Also, since their songs and hymns were composed in the peoples' languages and are considered (with the exception of Tamil) to be the earliest and often the greatest literature in these languages, the bhakti movements are also identified with the national–linguistic cultures of the different regions of India—consequently the role played by Buddhism and Jainism was generally ignored.

Naturally, then, analysis of these movements has been controversial. While some anti-caste radicals of the 19th and 20th centuries have tended to reject them altogether, others find solace and hope in the rise of lower-caste bhaktas and consider them as representing a religious revolt of the exploited and a proof of low-caste creativity. At the same time, questions have been raised about the relation of

the bhakti movements to Buddhism; often they are considered to have been influenced by Buddhism, and quite often Buddhism and the bhakti movements are put in the same category as 'protest movements' against orthodox Brahmanism. For both these reasons their analysis is crucial.

The following survey represents only the beginning of such an analysis. Difficulties in interpreting the bhakti movements stem from the very conditions of their origin. One aspect of their popularity is that 'modern' 20th century interpretations by Dalits and non-Brahmans stress the radicalism of the *sants* against traditional Brahmanic interpretations. However, the recorded 'traditions', which come mainly from the 13th to 18th centuries and minimise radicalism, are almost the only existing historical records we have. These very records, including official collections (there are few really 'critical' editions) of songs and poems, reflect Brahman dominance and the conditions under which the *sants* lived. A full interpretation has to be attempted, a task that has only recently begun. The translations given here reflect primarily those 'authenticated' (i.e., earlier) songs and poems that has been possible at the current stage of this ongoing work of recovery.

Nandanar: The Penalties of Caste

The earliest bhakti movements, the Shaivite and Vaishnavite movements in Tamil Nadu, were clearly connected with an aggressive Brahmanical revival. As Nilakantha Sastri has described it,

> people began to entertain fears of the whole land going over to Jainism and Buddhism...the worshippers of Shiva and Vishnu felt the call to stem the rising tide of heresy. The growth, on the one hand, of an intense emotional bhakti to Shiva or Vishnu and, on the other, of an outspoken hatred of Buddhists and Jains, are the chief characteristics of the new epoch. Challenges to public debate, competition in the performance of miracles, tests of the truth of doctrines by means of ordeal, became the order of the day. Parties of devotees under the leadership of one gifted saint or another traversed the country many times over, dancing and debating all their way. This great wave or religious enthusiasm attained its peak in the early seventh century and had not spent itself in the middle of the ninth (Sastri 1999: 382).

This conflict of Brahmanism with the samana tradition is marked by stories of violence, for instance, Sastri mentions the 'unpleasant legend' that 8000 Jains were put to death by impalement after the Shaivite saint Nanasambandar had vanquished them in a debate and converted the king (ibid.: 383). However legendary this may be, it provides support to Taranatha's accounts of robberies and burnings, cited in the last chapter.

However, there is no record of this conflict in the available information about the only Shaiva *sant* who was an untouchable. This is Nandanar, identified as a Pulaiya/Paraiya from the Thanjavur district. By the 12th century, when his story was recorded, this region was at the centre of the Chola kingdom, and along with practising an intensely irrigation-based agriculture was developing an elaborate caste and class hierarchy. Much of the land was under control of Brahmans, who were settled in their own independent villages. The Paraiyas were a caste which provided servile labour and ritual services in this region, while the term 'Pulaiya' is now the name of a similar untouchable caste of near-slave agricultural labourers in Kerala. The very confusion about names shows the slow process of differentiation of untouchable castes.

The legends relating to Paraiyas/Pulaiyas, mixed with a popular myth (itself within the framework of Brahmanism) that they were originally Brahman priests, suggest a history of conflict with Brahmans. A Tamil proverb calls them the 'older brother of the Brahman', and in a medieval poem on caste it is said that

> A Pulaiya of the south goes north
> learns the Vedas, becomes a Brahman (*parppan*);
> a Brahman from the north goes south
> loses his virtuous character, turns a Pulaiya.

Nandanar is said to belong, rather uncertainly, to the 660–842 CE period. What is known of his life comes from the *Periyapuranam*, a traditional 12th century work on all 63 Shaivite devotees that was written by a Vellala (upper non-Brahman caste) Shaivite scholar. This depicts Nandanar as a humble, law-abiding devotee, performing his traditional caste duties in the temple. It gives a romanticised description of his village:

> a small hamlet of Pulaiyas studded with small huts under old thatches overspread by creepers.... In the threshhold of the huts covered with strips of leather, little chicks were seen moving about in groups; dark children who wore bracelets of black iron were prancing about carrying little puppies whose yelps were drowned by the tinkling bells which girdled their waists. In the shade of the *mardu* trees, a female labourer sent her baby to sleep on a sheet of leather; there were mango trees from whose branchs drums were seen hanging; and under the coconut palms in little hollows on the ground, tiny-headed bitches were found lying quiet after pupping. The red-crested cocks crowed before dawn calling the brawny Pulaiyar to their day's work; and by day...spread the voice of the wavy-haired Pulaiya women singing as they were husky paddy. By the side of tanks...the music of many instruments accompanied the drinking fetes of Pulaiya women who wore on their heads fragrant flowers and ears of paddy-corn and who staggered in their dance as the result of increasing intoxication.

The long work hours, the very limited property (only chickens and dogs) and the association with drums remained for long characteristic of the Paraiyas.

According to the *Periyapuranam*, Nandanar was a *purattondan,* one of the Dalit temple servants who sang and danced to Shiva but remained outside the temple, serving the god by providing skin coverings and leather straps for making temple drums and other musical instruments. Nandanar's rebellion lies in the fact that he wanted to go further, to enter the temple itself to have a glimpse of the magnificantly carved idols of Shiva. This desire brings him out of his own village, and he embarks on a pilgrimage to the great Shiva temple at Chidambaram, supporting himself through various services, such as repairing a temple tank which had fallen into disuse. In spite of this, he is unable even to enter the town or pass through the Brahman streets towards the temple and finally only allowed to have a sight of the deity, or *darshan*, from far off, near the temple car-shed. The Nandi or bull of Shiva standing in his way is ordered aside by the god himself. The climax comes when the Brahmans of the town decide to give Nandanar a *homakundam*, a 'fire bath'; after passing through this fire, Nandanar is revealed to be a Brahman sage with a sacred thread, while angelic hosts break into a tumult of joy and shower fresh petals of fragrant flowers on all (Manickar 1990: 23–28).

Was this transformation a blessing bestowed upon Nandanar by the Brahmans to reveal his true worth, or does it mask the murder of a rebel, as recent radical interpretations would have it (ibid.: 47–48)? A 12th century account of a person who lived over 400 years earlier can be expected to give little evidence; in any case the very lack of historical records about Nandanar reveals the powerlessness of the Dalits. Somewhere in the decisive period of transformation between the 7th and 12th centuries, as the village society got stabilised, untouchability had become institutionalised with it.[1] What is emphasised in bhakti, as revealed in the story of Nandanar, is humble though ardent devotion, throwing oneself on the mercy of the deity, craving for God—a very different personal response from the self-controlled questioning called for by classical Buddhism.

What the life of this first untouchable *sant* shows is that, in spite of the claimed openness of the god to devotees of all castes, Nandanar could not as a Paraiya worship the deity within the temple. He could only do so after it is revealed that he is a Brahman. Thus, whether or not he was in actuality a rebel, the story itself reaffirms caste and untouchability. The records of the Shiva and Vaishnava devotional movements remained under Brahman control and upper caste control, and even the role of low-caste bhaktas in them was used to increase its mass appeal and not to provide any moral support for a rebellion against caste.

The Tamil movement originated before other bhakti movements. While the early period recorded conflict with Buddhism and Brahmanism, by the 12th century—which was also the time it spread to north India—the relevance of this conflict was lost. Buddhism was nearly wiped out of India; Jainism survived only in enclaves. The coming of Islam provided a more important context, particularly as the bhakti movement spread to Maharashtra and to north India where they began in the late 13th and 14th centuries.

[1] See H. Kotani, one of the noted Japanese scholars on Maharashtra, who notes that 'we know, in fact, that Indian society in general began to change from the bottom in the seventh or eighth century…and that this transformation gave rise to the predominant features of medieval India such as the village community…by the twelfth century' (in Kotani, 1997: 56).

Ravidas: 'Flowering above the World of Birth'

While Nandanar has become well-known only in Tamil Nadu and has had no recorded influence on other bhakti *sants*, the Chamar or leatherworker, Ravidas, who lived in the 15th century, is one of the most famous of *sants* in north India and has influenced many others. Many of his songs survive in some form or the other. There are countless stories about him and he is widely known as one of the greatest of *saguna* devotees, i.e., devotees of God 'with form', who take Shiva or Ram or Krishna or one of the many incarnations of Vishnu as their personal deity.

Ravidas is associated with the other great north Indian *sant*, Kabir, in a story where a great debate between them is represented as a *saguna* versus *nirguna* (without qualities) devotion debate. He is also linked to the Rajput princess Mirabai, most famous of the women devotees, who took him as her guru. His compositions are included in the *Adi Granth*, the scriptures of the Sikh community (Hawley and Juergensmeier 1988: 9–23).

His many songs show both humility and devotion: 'I am a peddlar for Ram; I traffic in his easy ecstasy. I've loaded myself with the wealth of Ram's name while the world is loaded down with poison' (ibid.: 29). They also show the aspiration to go beyond caste, though the translated poems, available from 'authenticated' collections, lack the bitter condemnation of Brahmanism and caste that can be found in Kabir and Tukaram.

> *A family that has a true follower of the Lord*
> *is neither high caste nor low caste, lordly or poor.*
> *The world will know it by its fragrance.*
> *Priests or merchants, labourers or warriors,*
> *halfbreeds, outcastes, and those who tend cremation fires –*
> *their hearts are all the same.*
> *He who becomes pure through love of the Lord*
> *exalts himself and his family as well…*
> *no one equals someone so pure and devoted –*
> *not priests, not heroes, not parasolled kings.*
> *As the lotus leaf floats above the water, Ravidas says,*
> *so he flowers above the world of his birth* (*Adi Granth* #38).

The dominant tradition traces the north Indian bhakti tradition to Ramananda, a Brahman who moved to Varanasi from the south

around the 14th century and gathered together a circle of devotees, becoming the guru of many famous *sants*, including both Ravidas and the weaver Kabir. In contrast to the self-questioning fostered by Buddhism, Brahmanism had always insisted that it was necessary to approach god or cosmological questions with the help of a guru. It was the guru who gave a *mantra*, a verse or word or phrase, that the seeker would repeat as a kind of self-hypnosis; and it was the guru who taught the 'secrets' of the tradition. The guru, ideally, would be a Brahman—like Ramananda. Making a Brahman a guru, and imposing the guru tradition on the bhakti movement, has been an important aspect of the 'brahmanising' process that it underwent.

As in the case of Nandanar, the documentation of the north Indian bhakti movement was done centuries later by literate high-caste men. An early account was written by Nabhadas around 1600, the most influential commentary on which was by Priyadas in 1712. These not only make Ramanand into Ravidas' main guru, but 'Brahmanise' Ravidas himself, analogous to the way that Nandanar's devotion was made acceptable through his being purified by fire and shown as being 'truly' a Brahman. In the case of Ravidas, he is said to have been a Brahman in his previous life, but because he offered Ramanand some food that had been given by a merchant who had dealings with Chamars, he was reborn as a Chamar after he died. This itself indicates the degree of purity–pollution behaviour observed even by Brahman ascetics; but worse if anything is the story that as a baby Ravidas would not accept the milk of his Chamar mother, but only of a Brahman woman (Hawley and Juergensmeier 1988: 15–16)!

Radical Dalits today question the Brahmanical interpretation of Ravidas. They claim that his guru was Sardanand, and emphasize his ability to defeat Brahmans time and again in debates. The Adi-Dharma, a radical anti-Hindu sect founded in the 10th century in the Punjab, takes Ravidas as a non-Hindu, anti-caste and a founder of practically an independent religion. Indeed, such 'vanis' as the following are impressive, if not substantiated as 'original':

> Ravidas says not to honour (do puja to) Brahmans, who are without merit;
> honour instead the feet of Candalas who are full of merit…

> 'Dependency is evil, the dependent are miserable—
> Ravidas considers dependency the lowest of all (*Shalvan Patrika*, 25 June 2001).

The dominant account can be disputed on good grounds: Ravidas himself never mentions Ramanand, who seems to have lived a full century before Ravidas. The *sants* mentioned in Ravidas' own poetry—those he considered his 'family'—include the Maharashtrian tailor Namdev and the weaver Kabir (Hawley and Juergensmeier 1988: 9–23).

Ravidas is depicted as having high-caste disciples. Among these are two Rajput women, Mirabai and Queen Jhali, who is said to have met Ravidas on a trip to Banaras. According to the story, she accepted Ravidas as a guru, against the strong advice of her Brahman advisors, and when she prepared a feast to honour him, the Brahmans declined to eat from the same vessels or sit in the same row with him—but they found that a Ravidas had miraculously materialised at the side of every Brahman. When they challenged his right to be there, 'he peeled back the skin from his chest and revealed a golden sacred thread that lay within, clear evidence of his inner brahmanhood' (Ibid.: 14–15).

In the end, Ravidas' *bhajans* reflect both a sense of poverty and caste humiliation and a desire to find a utopia without suffering, taxes or property; one that is, above all, a Begumpura or 'Queen City' of companionship:

> *The regal realm with the sorrowless name*
> *they call it Begumpura, a place with no pain,*
> *no taxes or cares, none owns property there,*
> *no wrongdoing, worry, terror, or torture.*
> *Oh my brother, I've come to take it as my own,*
> *my distant home, where everything is right...*
> *They do this or that, they walk where they wish,*
> *they stroll through fabled palaces unchallenged.*
> *Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free,*
> *those who walk beside me are my friends* (*Adi Granth* #3).

Kabir: 'Pandit, You've Got it Wrong'

> Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge.
> Tell me where untouchability

came from, since you believe in it.
Mix red juice, white juice and air–
a body bakes in a body.
As soon as the eight lotuses
are ready, it comes
into the world. Then what's untouchable?
Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels
decay into dust, while the potter
keeps slapping clay
on the wheel, and with a touch
cuts each one off.
We eat by touching, we wash
by touching, from a touch
the world was born.
So who's untouched? Asks Kabir.
Only he who has no taint of Maya (#41).[2]

Kabir (c. 1440–1518 CE), perhaps the most famous of the north Indian *sants,* was born into a low-caste weaver family in Banaras. Weavers, the creators and producers of the prized Indian textile tradition, had a respectable status in ancient India; they were not counted among the 'low castes' and they were often organised into guilds. Many were Buddhists, especially in the Bengal region, where Taranatha describes a weaver named Tanti-pa who became a powerful Buddhist Tantrik (*Taranatha* 1990: 249–51). They appear not to have easily accepted the degradation of their status under a crystallised *varnashrama* regime. Many became Muslim; others became followers of the Nath sect, a kind of Hindu Tantrism. It was natural, perhaps, for someone of this community, with its history of resistance to caste tyranny, to voice a radical protest against caste and against the hypocrisies of Brahmans.

Kabir is fortunate also in being the subject of sufficient research that has begun to unravel some of the legends. The work of Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh, for example, includes a beautiful translation into English of the Bijak collection, with comments by Hess, while Singh himself has proposed an alternative critical edition (*Kabir* 1986; see Hawley and Juergensmeier 1988: 185).

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[2] All numbers refer to the *Sabda* of the *Bijak*; translations by Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh.

Kabir is also said, in the tradition of the Brahman commentators, to have had Ramanand as a guru, and it is as unlikely with him as with Ravidas. In the traditional story, Kabir seeks out Ramananda, and fearing that as a low-born weaver he would not be accepted, lies on the stairs down which Ramanand goes for his daily bath in the Ganges; when Ramanand trips and utters 'Ram, Ram', Kabir takes these words as his mantra and his initiation. Among the problems with this story is that there is no indication anywhere in Kabir's writings that he knew Ramanand, let alone as a guru. The 'Ram' in his poems is abstract, simply a name for the divine, without reference to the hero of the *Mahabharata* (Hawley and Juergensmeier 1988: 35–49; and Linda Hess, Introduction to *Kabir* 1986: 3–6).

Kabir is so scathing about the claimed authority of Brahmans that it is hard to imagine him seeking out a Brahman guru:

> Saints, the Brahmin is a slicked-down butcher.
> He slaughters a goat and rushes for a buffalo
> without a twinge of pain in his heart.
> He lounges after his bath, slaps sandal paste
> on his brow, does a song and dance
> for the Goddess, crushes souls in the wink of an eye–
> the river of blood flows on.
> How holy! What a superior race! What authority
> in society, and how people grovel to get his initiation!
> It makes me laugh.
> They tell tales about ending sin
> but their actions are base.
> I've seen two of them throttle each other,
> but Yama carted off both.
> Kabir says, saints, this is Kaliyug:
> the age of phoney Brahmins (#11).

There is much in the tradition of Kabir that shows this enmity with Brahmans was strong and reciprocal. Brahmans, in one famous story, bring a case against him before the Muslim emperor Sikandar Lodi when he was visiting Banaras; Kabir is ordered to bow down but refuses, saying he only bows down before God. The emperor then decrees that Kabir should be bound in chains and thrown in the Ganges to be drowned, but he is found afterwards miraculously saved and standing unharmed on the bank. In another incident,

there is an attempt to incite a mob of untouchables against him, by calling them for a feast without providing food; however in another miracle the god comes in the guise of Kabir with enough food for all (Hawley and Juergensmeier 1988: 38–39).

Kabir, as noted, was a *nirguna bhakta,* that is, a follower of 'god without qualities', as opposed to the *saguna bhaktas*, or devotees of one of the named gods of the Brahmanic tradition, usually Krishna, Ram, or Shiva. This is evident in his poetry. Kabir knew of the Buddha only as one of the avatars of Vishnu, and as such was not attracted to the idea: 'the ten avatars are divine malarkey for those who really know. Kabir says, pay attention saints: only second things bloom and blow' (Kabir 1986: 46). However, much in his description of the mystic experience seems almost an invocation of *sunyata*. The impermanence of things, another Buddhist principle, is a major concern: 'Pandit, do some research and let me know how to destroy transiency' (ibid.: 35).

His mysticism is impressive and often pointedly directed against Brahmanism:

> Pandit, you've got it wrong.
> There's no creator or creation there,
> no gross or fine, no wind or fire,
> no sun, moon, earth or water, no radiant form,
> no time there, no word, no flesh, no faith,
> no cause and effect, nor any thought
> of the Veda. No Hari or Brahma,
> no Siva or Sakti, no pilgrimage
> and no rituals. No mother, father
> or guru there. Is it two or one?
> Kabir says, if you understand now,
> you're guru, I'm disciple (#43).

As Hess notes, Kabir very often used '*ultabhasha*' or 'upside-down' language, paradoxical language, almost designed to shock listeners into awareness. There are endless images of 'sprout without seed, branch without trunk, fruit without flower, son born of a sterile womb, climbing a tree without legs….' (ibid.: 135). This is similar to the songs of *sahajiya* ('natural' or 'spontaneous') Buddhists, one of the last forms of Vajrayana.

If karma, as Hess argues, is seen in the popular notion as a kind of bank account cause-and-effect where every action has a logical

and inexorable effect (ibid.: 155), Kabir can be said to be searching for a form of action which will not lead to rebirth. This is a Buddhist search, not a Brahmanical one, which simply interprets action as unreal, or a Jain renunciation of action altogether (see also Bronkhorst 2000: 112–28) and Kabir searches for it with a stress on mindfulness (another Buddhist virtue) and uses his paradoxical language to express it:

> A tree stands without root,
> without flowers bears fruit;
> no leaf, no branch, and eight
> sky-mouths thundering.
> Dance done without feet,
> tune played without hands,
> praises sung without tongue,
> singer without shape or form–
> the true teacher reveals.
> Seek the bird's, the fish's path (#24).[3]

While Kabir is often taken as a *sant* who represents the reconciliation of Hinduism and Islam, in fact he is, as Hawley and Juergensmeier have stressed (1988: 40–41), scathingly critical of both religions, of their rituals and of their priesthood. Further, out of all the *sants*, he is perhaps the only one who does not express what is called 'devotionalism', humbling oneself before or throwing oneself on the mercy of a divine being. Instead, he requires, if not exactly 'thinking' from his listeners/disciples, some kind of ultimate attention or mindfulness, and does not hesitate to proclaim the greatness of the devotee himself:

> This is the big fight, Raja Ram.
> He who settles it is free from bonds
> Is Brahma bigger or where he came from?
> Is the Veda bigger or where it was born from?
> Is the mind bigger or what it believes in?
> Is Ram bigger or the knower of Ram?
> Kabir turns round, it's hard to see,
> Is the holy place bigger or the devotee? (#112).

[3] While the paradoxes appear *sahajiya*, as Hess has noted, we can also find an echo in *Dhammapada* (#92–93) of the 'bird's path.'

The second line, in most texts, is actually, *jo niruvai so niravan* (Kabir 1986: 184). Not only does the Buddhist term here survive; with Kabir, it comes near to surviving with something like its original meaning: 'whoever can settle it is liberated.'

Mirabai: 'This Dyeing is Dear to Me'

> My mother, I wed Giridhar in a dream.
> Giridhar coloured me in red,
> I wed Giridhar in a dream
> In the circle of stars were garlands hung up
> Within which sat Nandlal.
> My mother, I wed Giridhar in a dream.
> I wore the beloved's chunri, the beloved was present.
> I circled the fire four times with him.
> Mira, who sang the glory of Giridhar, then said,
> This dream is a false chimera.
> My mother, I wed Giridhar in a dream (Mukta 1997: 121).[4]

Just as Kabir is linked to Ravidas, so is Mirabai (c. 1498–1546), the most famous woman *sant* in India. There are special features about the life and songs of these women, reflecting the patriarchal hold over the lives of women in India. Women are bound up with the household in a different way than men, a fact that, as we have already seen, was the major factor in the Buddha's negative response to their demands to join the Sangha. For those who were not Buddhists or Jains, there was no Sangha to find refuge in. The devotees of most bhakti movements were expected to carry on their ordinary lives as householders while undertaking pilgrimages, taking disciples, singing devotional songs, teaching the people. This was problematic even for male devotees; for women it proved almost impossible in the absence of a fully supportive household, which was usually one of male bhaktas. In the absence of this they were often forced to reject the household life. Thus we find women *sants* renouncing their families, often using the theme of their love for the god as an excuse or substitute for the love for a husband.

[4] All quotations from *bhajans* recorded by Parita Mukta.

Some take on the shape of an aged, wrinkled woman to show the impossibility of any kind of sexual desire. The oldest known non-Buddhist woman *sant* is Avvaiyyar of the Sangam age in Tamil Nadu. She and her brother Thiruvalluvar are both children of a Brahman man and an untouchable woman; but where Thiruvalluvar lives a householder's life, Avvai is transformed into an old woman to escape family life, and only then can she carry on the life of a wandering teacher (Uma Chakravarty, in Kishwar 1989: 19–21).

As Parita Mukta tells the story, Mirabai was a Rajput princess who left her home, rejected her husband and rebelled in the name of Krishna against the chains and glories of Rajput tradition. She proclaims 'Giridhar', Krishna as the holder of mountains, to be her beloved, and renounces marriage relations with a high-caste Rana in his name. But Mira is important for more than this: she is renowned for accepting Ravidas (Rohidas, as his name is written in the western areas) as her guru. This was another rebellion: a high-caste woman taking a guru from among the Dalits. Further, as Parita Mukta's research has shown, Mira did not get refuge among families of wealth and status after leaving her princely home, but found a new community among the Dalits, the weavers and other low-caste communities of Rajasthan and nearby states. Here, Mukta argues, she forges a new bond with the toiling people and finds a new life, companionship compensating for poverty (Mukta 1997: 37–45). She makes a great reversal, in which manual labour, even the kind of manual labour considered 'polluting' by Brahmanic standards, becomes revalued:

> Mira found a guru in Rohidas.
> She bowed at his feet, and asked his blessings.
> *Refrain: Mira's Mohan, come to the Mertni's desh.*
> I have nothing to do with caste or other divisions.
> Let the world do what it will,
> I offer you my body, mind and soul.
> *Mira's Mohan, come to the Mertni's desh.*
> I skin animals and dye the skins.
> My work is to dye.
> This dyeing is dear to me, this dyeing is dear to me,
> Dye my soul in it.
> *Mira's Mohan, come to the Mertni's desh.*

> Bai Mira found a guru in Rohidas.
> She touched his feet—take me to the other side.
> *Mira's Mohan, come to the Mertni's desh* (ibid.: 1997: 112)

It is in this way that Mira takes her place in the 'company of the saints' and her name becomes known. Her departure, her actions, are a deadly insult to Rajput honour, and there are stories of her husband, the Rana, trying to call her back, sending her poison. In the end she disappears, or dies, in a temple of Krishna, said to have been absorbed by the god himself. Mukta argues that quite possibly she was killed in revenge on the orders of her insulted husband (ibid.: 225–31). While even her most radical songs do not depart from the framework of *saguna bhakti*, devotion to a personal God, she stands nevertheless as a rebel against the patriarchy and casteism of medieval society, someone who could actively identify with all its marginalised sections.

Cokhamela: 'The Fruit of What was Done Before'

The most widespread bhakti tradition in the western India state of Maharashtra, the Varkari movement focuses not on around Shiva or the *avatars* of Vishnu but rather on Vithoba, the black god of Pandharpur. While Vithoba is identified by the Brahmanic tradition with Vishnu, he evidently originated as a 'hero-stone' erected to a guardian protector of the semi-pastoral early Maharashtrians. In the popular mind while stories of Krishna are told, they are less important that stories of the *sants*, and the god is most often appealed to a Vithoba or as Pandurang, a name that evokes the town.

Like other bhakti movements, the Varkari *sants* came from diverse backgounds and included men and women. They remained as householders, their unity and commitment symbolised by the wearing of the *mal* (a kind of rosary), vegetarianism, and a yearly pilgrimage to Pandharpur when they had the 'company of the saints'. Today also hundreds of thousands of people walk hundreds of kilometers on this pilgrimage, normally organised in caste-based groups around the palanquin of a particular *sant*.

The movement began in the 13th century under the leadership of Namdev, a tailor, and Dnyaneshwar, a Brahman whose father was

made outcaste because he had given up the life of a sanyasi to return to household life. Namdev was responsible for the spread of the movement, Dnyaneshwar for its theorisation. Dnyaneshwar's greatest work was a philosophical commentary on the Bhagavad Gita in Marathi known as *Dnyaneshwari*. This *Dnyaneshwari* with its Vedantic idealisation is still used today in long readings in the villages, usually financed by the elite. While it is credited with bringing the 'highest' teachings of the hitherto Sanskritised religion into the vernacular for the masses, it is clearly an ongoing Brahmanisation of the tradition. At the same time, as the movement spread, it began to draw in devotees from all the various caste-communities throughout the Marathi-speaking areas and with them expressions of aspiration and equality.

However, the problematics of the bhakti movement are also shown in the stories of these *sants*. Ekanath (c. 1533–1599) was the Brahman devotee most famous for his progressive attitude on caste issues, and he wrote a large number of songs taking the voice of a untouchable Mahar; many were also critical of false Brahmans and false devotees. There are many famous stories which show that he invited untouchables to feasts and also dinned in their homes. In one, a pious devotee, Ranya Mahar, invites Ekanath; he goes, is outcasted and does penance, but then accepts another invitation. When the Brahmans check on this, they see him eating in his own home: the God Vithoba has taken Ekanath's form and eaten at the house of the Mahar (Zelliot 1997: 23). This story comes from an 18th century biographer of all the *sants*, named Mahipati, again a Brahman.

But the story does not indicate a challenge to caste as a system. Ekanath's orientation to untouchables is shown as a paternalistic one, and he did not, like Kabir, attack Brahmanic rituals or the Vedas. Neither did Maharashtra's most famous untouchable saint, Cokhamela (second half of 13th century–1338).

Cokhamela and his family seem to have followed the traditional work of the Mahars throughout. Though Cokhamela defies the Brahman priests of Pandharpur with his desire to worship Vithoba, and though Vithoba is shown as aiding his worship by miracles, there is little evidence of Cokhamela's active protest against caste oppression or desire to escape his traditional duties. He does show a heightened sense of pollution, as a recent study by Eleanor Zelliot shows:

> The Vedas are polluted; the ksastras are polluted; the Puranas are full of pollution.
> The self is polluted; the overself is polluted; the body is full of pollution.
> Brahma is polluted; Vishnu is polluted; the world is full of pollution.
> Birth is polluted; death is polluted.
> Cokha says: there's pollution at the beginning and at the end (#282; all translations and numbers of *abhangs* from Zelliot 1995).

Thus, while many of his *abhangs* lament his oppressed state, a very famous one even gives a seemingly very orthodox explanation:

> I am a low-caste Mahar;
> Prevously in the avatar of Nila
> I had slandered Krishna
> and so was born as a Mahar;
> Cokha says, this impurity is the fruit
> of what was done before (#76).

Of course, it is quite possible that this was an interpolated *abhang*. Dalit-Buddhist radicals have recently interpreted it to argue that it refers to a 'Nila Naga' who had challenged Krishna's claim to divinity, in the context of major conflict between the Brahmanising Aryans and the resisting indigenous people (the 'Nagas'); Mahars then are seen as Nagas who were branded as untouchables (Javale 1999).[5] Unfortunately, there is insufficient scholarship to date to back up such claims, and the existing *abhang* seems to have a clear meaning fitting into the Brahmanic framework. Thus, the popular abhangs of Cokhamela suggest his humble approach to God, his pleading for humanity in the face of an accepted inferiority. One of his most famous *abhangs* is sung on the road to Pandharpur:

> The cane is crooked, but the sugar is sweet;
>   *Refrain:* Why be fooled by outward appearance?
> The river is winding, but the water is pure;
> The bow is bent, but the arrow is straight;
> Cokha is uncouth, but his devotion is not (#125).

[5] The reference to Nagas is particularly interesting both in the context of the historical evidence for these in the Satavahana period in Maharashtra—and the fact that 'Nila Naga' is a subject of tradition in faraway Kashmir.

However, Eleanor Zelliot has noted that more bitterness is shown in many *abhangs* of Cokha's son, Karmamela, which may well reflect growing up in an atmosphere in which equality is seen as a possibility.

> You made us low caste. Why don't you face that fact, Great Lord?
> Our whole life leftover food to eat. You should be ashamed of this.
> You have eaten in our home. How can you deny it?
> Cokha's Karmamela asks: Why did you give me life?
> Are we happy when we're with you? O Cloud-Dark One, you don't know!
> The low place is our lot; the low place is our lot;
> the low place is our lot, King of Gods!
> We never get the good sweet food.
> It's a shameful life here for us.
> It's a festival of bliss for you and misery written on our faces.
> Cokha's Karmamela asks, O God, why is this our fate? (#3–4).

The protest is there, but is repressed. The whole situation illustrates the major problem of the bhakti movement: since its records were not in the hands of the devotees themselves, in contrast to Buddhism or Jainism, the movement was open to an immediate theoretical and practical appropriation. In fact, the stories of Cokhamela, and the songs he wrote, show not so much the liberatory thrust of the bhakti movements as the degree to which caste had become crystallised in India of this period, from which there was no real way out. His death took place when a wall he and other Mahars were working on as part of their traditional duty collapsed and buried them (Zelliot 1992: 3–4).

Tukaram: 'Good You Made Me a Kunbi'

The seeds of revolt in bhakti devotionalism flowered in Maharashtra in the 17th century with the great poet Tukaram (1608–1649). His *abhang* beginning, 'Good you made me a Kunbi; otherwise I might have died an arrogant hypocrite!' (#320)[6] is

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[6] Translations are by myself with the help of Bharat Patankar. The references are to *Tukaram* (1973), the comprehensive collection of his poetry published by the Maharashtra state government.

ironic; it is an attack on Brahman hypocrisy. His status as a Shudra was something he rebelled against throughout his life.

Tukaram was from a well-to-do family of farmer-moneylender in a village not too far from present-day Pune. However, the Kunbis (later called Marathas, and considered to be the 'dominant caste' in Maharashtra) were considered Shudras and thus, according to Brahmanic orthodoxy were without any rights to learning or priestly functions. He lived during the regime of the Bijapur state, which was as willing as any Muslim state to enforce varnashrama laws, though his last years coincided with the early ones of the hero-king Shivaji, the founder of an independent Maratha state. It was a fairly prosperous and commercialised agricultural society, though without the high surplus-production of the irrigated agriculture of the Kaveri delta area of Tamil Nadu or the Gangetic valley. Nevertheless, it was vulnerable to famine, which also struck in the early years of Tukaram's life.

There is an impressively large collection of his songs, mainly in the *abhang* form—numbering 4607 in the government-published collection. This vast outpouring includes, on the one hand, powerful and emotional devotional songs, a whiplash of emotions in which Tukaram seems to have been hurled from the heights to the depths and back again, and on the other some simple and beautifully written praise of Vithoba:

> How are you a lord, not showing yourself to my eyes?
> beautiful, fair, profuse.
> *Refrain: Four-armed; with a rosary and musk traced on your brow,*
> *holding a conch-shell, a discuss, a mace,*
> Wearing the Vaijayanti necklace;
> rings gleaming in both ears.
> Tuka says, Lord, run, show me your feet,
> Pandurang, mother, by your grace (#4333).

Along with these are poems of fierce social criticism, include scathing attacks on caste, religious superstition and Brahman pretensions in some of the harshest language imaginable. He bitterly characterised the decadence of his time:

> Grabbing gold they show their girls,
> taking wombs as things on sale...
> *Refrain: This is the dharma of our time:*

> *the good is slave, the evil is king.*
> Leaving righteousness
> vile Brahmans have become thieves.
> They hide the *tilak* on their forehead
> and wear Muslim pants and leather shoes.
> They sit on seats of power oppressing
> and keep the people starving.
> They keep the kitchen accounts
> Living on oil and butter.
> They are servants of the base
> and get beatings for their mistakes.
> The ruler oppresses the people,
> the holy places nourish evil.
> The Vaisya, Sudra
> all are naturally so low.
> These are all the outer colours
> the green inside is masked by sham.
> Tuka says, O God,
> don't sleep but run to help (#267).

At the same time he could condemn caste with much more harshness than either of the Dalit saints we have discussed:

> He is not a Brahman who abhors the touch of a Mahar.
> *Refrain: What retribution can he pay? He won't throw his life away!*
> A Chandala drives him wild, it's his heart that's defiled
> Tuka says, his caste's defined by what fills his mind (#55).

And he could be ferocious against all forms of religious deception, condemning Brahmanic rituals, *maths*, preachers of the Vedanta, practitioners of Shakta or the 'goddess' cults; magicians and hypocrites of all kinds.

Tukaram's life and writings are a subject of intense debate. His career as a poet and devotee of Vithoba began after a major famine and traumas such as the death of his wife, when he is said to have lost all urge to lead a normal householder's life, showing no interest in farming and drowning the records of debts of his father. It was after this that he took up the worship of Vithoba, a traditional family deity. The orthodox interpretation sees him as a failure in business, just as Kabir is characterised as a mild person who often messed up his weaving by falling into trances, even though this 'mildness' hardly fits the sarcastic and challenging tone of so much

of his poetry.[7] As with other non-Brahman bhakti devotees, Tukaram is given a Brahman guru. On the basis of a single poem (#368) one 'Babaji' is said to have been his guru, giving him a 'lineage' going back to Chaitanya, the Bengali follower of Krishna. Tukaram's sufferings are described, including a period where he drowns his manuscripts in the river and they are saved after a miraculous intervention by Vithoba. He goes through periods of meditation and madness, and finally, at the young age of 41, leaves the world—either miraculously lifted to the heavens, in the traditional religious version or, as a more 'modern' version has it simply slipping into the forest saying farewell to his followers (see Chitre's introduction to *Tukaram* 1991: x–xiv).

As in the case of other low-caste popular *sants*, this traditional story is hotly contested, most recently in a popular Marathi book by A.H. Salunkhe, who depicts Tukaram as a social rebel challenging Brahmanic dominance. He begins with the argument that Tukaram drowned his debt records to renounce the exploitative life of a moneylender and challenges the notion that Babaji was his guru, noting that Tukaram himself had said in many poems that he had no guru except 'Pandurang,' the legendary first devotee of Vithoba (Salunkhe 1997: 9–33, 137–69). Salunkhe stresses the role of Brahmans in persecuting Tukaram, describing a case that was brought against him for slander and heresy for having taken Brahman disciples; following this his property was confiscated, he was banished from the village, and his poems were immersed in the river—resulting in the loss of so many valuable contributions.

Finally, carrying the charge of Brahman conspiracy to its height, Salunkhe has argued that Tukaram was murdered, pointing out that he disappeared the morning after the second day of Holi, an inauspicious day for any kind of religious happening, but one easy enough to commit a murder on (ibid.: 234–82); that his family fled and his property was confiscated. In arguing this, he also claims that some well-known *abhangs* are interpolations— and makes the point that this despoliation of Tukaram's thought was the most murderous attack of all.

[7] This tendency to characterise low-caste devotees as inept in the everyday world of affairs seems to be a way of rendering them 'spiritual' and thereby minimising the significance of their worldly revolt.

There is some evidence to back up Salunkhe's assertions. In regard to the guru issue, for instance, the 'Babaji' poem seems strikingly out of place. Salunkhe's opponents in this debate (including More, and even Chitre, who has hardly deigned to notice him) have never dealt with the question of interpolation and the quality of the source material that they base their arguments on. In fact, Tukaram's *abhangs* rarely refer to Dnyaneshwar, the Brahman forerunner of the Maharashtra bhakti movement; it is rather Namdev, the low-caste tailor, who is said to have come to him in a dream along with Vithoba himself and told him to write poetry. Similarly, neither the traditional miraculous story of Tukaram's death, nor Chitre's 'modernistic' version really make sense; the possibility of murder—for anyone who knows how Indian politics works—cannot be ruled out. His final years coincided with the earliest period of the rise of Shivaji, which was one of political turmoil. Salunkhe has not proved his case, but he has given a challenge that should not be ignored.[8]

A related aspect of the debate regarding Tukaram has to do with claims of Buddhist influence. An emerging Dalit critique argues that Vithoba was a Boddhisattva and that he was viewed in this way by Tukaram and other famous *sants*. 'Sant Tukaram [was a] true Buddhist bhikku', writes one, regarding the nature of his teachings (Javale 1999: 46). It is true that most of Tukaram's life appears as a classic bhakti devotee, emotional, suffering and searching through all the trials of life, writing of the beauty and grandeur of the god, the humbleness of the devotee (there is a whole series of *abhangs* where he pictures himself as Vithoba's 'dog'), throwing himself on god's mercy and getting angry at its absence. He also makes references to his own greatness: 'Smaller

[8] It seems that Tukaram, though writing a series of songs praising the courage and dedication of ordinary soldiers, rejected almost with horror contact with Shivaji himself, seeing in it only the false lures of worldly success (1884–1897). Because of the adultation in which Shivaji is held today, this issue is evaded both by Tukaram's most prestigious Marathi interpreter, Sadanand More (himself a descendent of the family) and by Salunkhe, most well-known proponent of a radical interpretation see him as a proto-nationalist and inspirer of Shivaji (More 1996: 33–39) and by Salunkhe. Phule, however, sees a Brahmanic conspiracy in Ramdas' (the Brahman *sant* purported to be the guru of Shivaji) preventing a meeting a Shivaji and the great Shudra saint Tukaram (Phule 1991: 236). The truth is more likely that particularly in these early years of Shivaji's own career, Tukaram had no reason to see him as any different from any of the other looter-rulers he criticised in his poems.

than an atom, Tuka is as vast as the sky' (#993) in poems which seem to proclaim the Vedantic identity of the self and universe, *atman* and *Brahman*. Most of his poetry refers to a god-experience. Yet, Tukaram's twists and paradoxes often seem to indicate that he (or the 'company of saints') in fact commands the god. There are puzzles about what was obviously a unique spiritual search.

Tukaram, for instance, was trying meditation, which was not in the Varkari tradition. At first he would go off to meditate in the forest, but his favourite place became a former Buddhist cave in the Bhandara hill near his village. But, though he describes many mystical experiences throughout his poems, his real 'enlightenment' seems to have come many years later, towards the end of his life, when he sat for 15 days and achieved an illumination which in many ways is as mysterious as that of the Buddha.

Before this, it seems that he wrote a number of 'god is dead' poems:

> God has died for me,
> for others let him be.
> Refrain: I'll not tell his stories or take his name again,
> we have killed each other and gone.
> Abuse along with praise, that's how I spent my days.
> Tuka says, I'm standing calm
> That's how my life has been (#2349).

The character of his enlightenment experience (or experiences) can be sensed in the following songs—though it is precisely here that the problem of translation becomes acute:

> My death has died
> and made me deathless.
> *Refrain: The place is erased, the bottom is erased.*
> *The body's emotions have been stripped.*
> The flood has come and gone,
> I have held firmly to life.
> Tuka says, the accumulated store is finished;
> truth has come through (#2348)

> I gave birth to myself,
> I came into my own womb.
> *Refrain: Enough now of vows,*
> *My yearnings have passed away*
> It is good that I fell prey

and I died that day (2)
Looking both ways,
Tuka is as he is (#1337).[9]

Here the emphasis on own experience and on passions and their control appears Buddhistic. How much Tukaram actually knew about Buddhism is another question. It would seem little: in one *abhang* he describes the 'Buddha avatar' as compassionate, 'with mute, countenance fixed attention' but then refers to his 'four arms' and simply accepts that this is only an avatar of Vishnu.

There is however one significant link with Buddhism. Tukaram is supposed to have suggested to his famous woman follower, Bahenabai,[10] that she translate Asvaghosha's *Vajrasucci*, a Buddhist anti-caste text; these constitute numbers 277–294 of her collected songs (Javadekar 1979: 324–329). In her collection, however, the *Vajrasucci* is identified as an 'Upanishad' and it remains an open question whether Bahenabai herself knew that this came from a radically different tradition. The verses appeal to reason and provide a simple refutation of the beliefs that Brahmans represent an essentially different or special kinds of being:

[9] See also Chitre (1991: 173, 175, 192) for radically different translations. These poems in fact illustrate the problem of Brahmanic translations. Chitre's overall translations are excellent and beautiful in many ways and his discussion is perceptive–except for the following points. One is that he seems to accept uncritically the official collection of Tukaram without any concern for a 'critical edition'. Thus he does not answer Salunkhe's criticisms about interpolations and distortions, and has opposed him rather acerbically in the debate that erupted in the Marathi literary world over Salunkhe's emphasis on the rebel Tukaram. An important result of this is that he accepts uncritically such stories as that of Babaji being Tukaram's guru, and cannot imagine that Tukaram could have been murdered. Also, like many upper-caste Indians, he 'brahmanises' and 'Vedanticises' the interpretations and thus the translations of a number of poems, e.g. capitalising 'Other' to imply a divine being (see the poems in Chitre 1991: 178, 183, 185). He mysteriously adds a section describing a mystical experience following the poem about Babaji (1991: 170), suggesting that the mystical experience was part of the supposed meeting.

[10] Bahenabai was also an important composer of *gathas* and *abhangs*, and just as it was shocking to the Rajputs that Mirabai could take the Chamar Ravidas as her guru, so Bahenbai's affiliation was an affront to the orthodox of her time, and she had to face many family traumas in following Tukaram.

> Who can without doubt be called a Brahman?
> Let us think and analyse the meaning of the word.
> Then they should be saluted and adored as supreme,
> who appointed the words of the Vedas as a gift for *moksa*;
> Life, the body, caste, colour, action, religion, let us look and search out the meaning,
> Baheni says, first see if wisdom, learning, spiritual and theoretical understanding
> are the marks of a Brahman (#278).

The poem then critiques all these ways of characterising the 'essence' of the Brahman—'life' (*jiv*), 'body' (*deh*), 'caste/birth' (*jati*), 'wisdom' (*panditya*), 'action' (*karma*) and 'religion' (*dharma*)—arguing either that they can in no way differentiate among persons or that they simply make no sense. Since such characteristics belongs to all living human beings, 'Brahmans' as a caste have nothing unique in them. Bahenbai then composes several verses of her own on the same theme:

> Those who tell stories of Hari are called Haridas,
> those who are saintly are called saints,
> We give names according to actions, and identify all people
> in this way,
> Sonars are those who make things of gold,
> those who do medicine are called Vaidyas,
> Baheni says, in the same way,
> one who dwells with Brahma is saluted as a Brahman' (#295).

This is certainly the Buddhist style of dealing with the issue of Brahmans and birth.

Tukaram, remembered as one of the greatest writers in Marathi, an equivalent of Shakespeare in English or Goethe in German (Chitre 1990, 1991: Intro). To the 'orthodox' he is a great devotee who nevertheless affirmed Vedanta and the real superiority of the Vedas, while non-Brahman radicals picture him as a social rebel and to Dalits he is nearly a Buddhist. The real research on Tukaram and his outpouring of poetry and song, remains to be done.

'Crypto-Buddhism' in Orissa

Finally we come to the bhakti movement of Orissa, which was one of the last strongholds of Mahayana and Vajrayana, and where the

direct influence of Buddhism lasted much longer. According to N.N. Basu, after the destruction of the monasteries of Vikramsila and Udantapura around CE 1200, the bhikkus fled mainly to Orissa and Tibet. In Orissa they enriched the Buddhist movement which survived for centuries on a kind of underground basis (1982: 12). He argues that the Bauris, or 'Bathoris', one of the well-known Dalit castes in Orissa, were originally equal in rank to the Brahmans, but persecuted for following the observances of Buddhism. (This illustrates a persistent theme, later emphasised by Iyothee Thass and Ambedkar, of Dalits being originally Buddhists).

The medieval bhakti movement in Orissa (c. 1450–1600) is described as a 'social protest movement' by a young Dalit scholar, Raj Kumar. Its founder was Sarala Das, a poet who took the title 'Sudramuni' to challenge the idea that only the twice-born could be sages. As a protest against the Sanskrit writing of court poets who took the king as their center, he wrote the *Mahabharata*, *Bilaka Ramayana* and *Chandi Purana* in the language of the people focusing on their real-life situation. Following him were the *Panchasakhas*, five famous Vaishnava *sants*: Balarama Das, Jagannatha Das, Achutananda Das, Jasobanta Das and Ananta Das. These figures dominated Oriya literature for a century. They used the language of the people, protested against the rigidities of temple life and monasteries, and sought to 'rise above the dualistic debates reducing religion almost to the level of an intellectual polemic and ignorant prejudice' (Raj Kumar 1995: 97). They also sought to participate in the Vedantic discussions held at the Jagannatha temple, and challenged the prohibition against the right of Shudras to study the Vedas and Dharmashastras.

Basu claims that this was a kind of 'crypto-Buddhism', a synthesis of Tantra, Buddhism and Vaishnavite themes. Achutananda Das is described as wandering in the forest in search of the Lord, who tells him,

> In the Kaliyuga I have made myself manifest again as Buddha. It is desirable, however, for you in the Kaliyuga to hide your Buddhistic frames of mind from view. You (five) are indeed my five souls, my five lives. All trouble and calamities will now be put an end to by means of the Nirakara mantra (devotion to the formless Brahman or Sunya)… I tell you, take refuge in Buddha, in mother Adi-shakti as the first primordial energy (i.e. Dharma) and in the Sangha…know that the Buddha is none else but Brahman himself (cited Basu 1982: 113).

From such examples Basu argues that the five were not Vaishnavite poets but 'mighty pillars of the…crypto-Buddhist community of Utkal' (Basu 1982: 114). However, the basic spirit of this quotation, asserting the existence of a supreme deity who is identified with the Buddha, suggests instead an absorption into Brahmanic ideas. This is similar to the way the Buddhist term *sunyata*, which had clearly become widely known by the second millennium in the region, was appropriated as 'Sunyam' by Ramai Pandit, apparently a Brahman scholar and 'guru' of the movement. Pandit describes *Sunyam* as

> He who has neither a beginning nor an end, nor a middle…neither hands nor feet, neither body nor voice, neither form nor image; and who is afraid neither of birth nor death—He who is knowable only by the greatest of Yogis, sages; who underlies and upholds all classes of men; who is the sole lord of all the worlds; who brings about the realization of the desires of his devotees and confers boons upon gods and men alike (ibid.: 9–10).

Here a Buddhist term is used but the meaning is more Brahmanic in spirit than Kabir's *nirguna bhakti*. If this represents 'crypto-Buddhism', it would seem here that the use of Brahmanic ideas was overwhelming the Buddhistic elements. In Orissa, as elsewhere, the course of the bhakti movement shows an appropriation and reinterpretation by the literate upper castes who distort the fundamental protest of the radical *sants*.

The methodological issue therefore emerges once again: the records of the bhakti movement in Orissa as elsewhere were in the hands of the upper castes. Only a more thorough exploration of the life and songs of the Orissa *sants* will make it possible to assess their meaning.

How can the impact of Buddhism on society be really measured? The identification of *sunyata*/Buddha as Brahma is like the adoption of the Buddha as an avatar of Visnu. It shows the power of Buddhism in society, but by itself it is not so much an evidence of Buddhist influence as a part of the strategy of Brahmanism, exemplified in the absorption of the idea of 'non-violence' by ending animal sacrifice (by the upper castes), but with little of the basic teachings being taken up. Just as the legendary guru Brhaspati was said to have taught the materialism of the Lokayata tradition to the *asuras* in order to mislead and deceive them, so the Buddha, as an

avatar of Visnu, was said to have had the role of deceiving the wicked. We have seen in Chapter 5 how the puranas used this to justify slaughter of Buddhists and other 'heretics'. Once again, the fundamental conflict of Brahmanic and Buddhist ideas is clear.

The Meaning of Bhakti

Some major issues emerge out of this brief survey of the vast range of bhakti movements in India. One is the problem of historical records and 'voice'. The institutions, including the record-keeping of the movements were not really controlled by the low-caste devotees themselves, however popular and charismatic individuals may have been. All the places of pilgrimage and temples were under control of Brahman priests; all the records of the movements and thus their interpretations were done by Brahmans or a few other literate 'high' castes. This presents a problem for historians and for contemporary interpreters of the movements. This fact must have also played a crucial role in defining the directions for the *sants* themselves, who did not control their own traditions and so could not access easily the true thoughts and life of the devotees who had gone before them. To this degree, each had to reinvent his or her own revolt.

In assessing all these *sant*-poets, the way in which we 'know' of their songs and their meanings has to be taken into account. Parita Mukta has pointed out the distortions about Mirabai's life given in various versions of—the Rajputs, Gandhi, the films and cassettes of today—by comparing them with songs she could collect even in the 1990s from among the people which show, a different Mira and in which new themes emerge. The research on and translations of Kabir by Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh have revealed a radicalism that is not evident in lines of his that are most often quoted in India today. Hess also suggests a Buddhist connection of Kabir that has otherwise not been brought out. Eleanor Zelliot is bringing out new aspects of Cokhamela and his family. Our reading of Tukaram, the recent work of A.H. Salunkhe, and the essays of contemporary Dalit-Buddhist writers suggest a very radical and much more 'Buddhist' Tukaram than is supposed in the popular view. One wonders how much would a detailed reading/analysis of other *sants* of the bhakti movement reveal similar radicalism? What would genuine critical editions of the texts really show?

What of the apparent differences between the Dalit *sants* like Cokhamela and Ravidas and the shudra *sants* like Tukaram and Kabir? In the recorded literature it is clear that the Dalits, from what we know of them do not condemn the caste system in the same thoroughgoing and scathing way and are nowhere near as critical of Brahmanism as a system. This difference can be attributed to the much more helpless situation of Dalits who were untouchables as compared to Shudras who were in the caste hierarchy. There is much less space for them to even find a voice, let alone keep a record for the benefit of historians and researchers today!

The essential powerlessness of Dalits and low castes in the bhakti movements which were taking place in the era of the established dominance of Brahmanism can be seen in several ways. First, because Brahmanic dominance allowed little scope for autonomy, the form of organisation of the bhakti cults was far different from the regulated collective life of Jain or Buddhist bhikkus, who had a solid residential community around them. The *sants* appear as individuals, sometimes eccentric, often ecstatic. The 'guru-tradition' they are connected to is a very tenerous one, and seems to have little real meaning in their lives. While the 'community of saints' is essential for their lives, it seems to be loose and floating; they meet each other on pilgrimages, at the shrines of their favoured deities, or in debate and discussion. But their householder's life remains enveloped in a caste-bound feudal society. The bhakti community did not provide a strong base of material, emotional and political support of the kind that collective life fostered in the monasteries of Buddhists. While the support of the oppressed and exploited could support those who rebelled to some extent, it could not help them change their lives significantly or change the world; it could not act very effectively against the overwhelming dominance of Brahmans and the overarching presence of the caste hierarchy. The greatest sufferers from this lack of an autonomous 'monastic' or religious community were the *bhaktas* from untouchable castes, and women.

We can see another striking difference between the *sants* and the earlier samana tradition in the lack of access to political power. Whereas the samana philosophers and teachers engaged in dialogue with kings and wealthy merchants, there is little of this happening with the *sants*. During the periods when these bhakti movements were occurring, we do not see them speaking to and trying to influence

the wealthy and powerful; the world of the rulers was almost entirely the world of Brahmanical influence by this time. Thus Brahmans could easily succeed, as stories record, in bringing Tukaram and Kabir to local courts or even those of rulers (whether Hindu or Muslim did not seem to matter) for blasphemy and slanders against Brahmanism. If the *sants* did not seem to engage in any serious effort to transform society—except through their often bitter and sarcastic poetry—this was simply because it appears to have been impossible at the time. Brahmanism in alliance with kings, whether Muslim or 'Hindu,' was in firm control of the social world.

The bhakti movements show a clear conflict with Brahmanism and the caste and gender hierarchies it involved, but they also show an almost overwhelming degree of Brahman dominance. Even the framework of the legends about them illustrates the power of Brahmanism, for example in showing them as of low birth for 'sins' in a former existence, or as being 'truly' twice-born. They were also physically repressed. Not only were untouchable and low-caste devotees socially and religiously discriminated against, barred from temples and sometimes beaten when they tried to come to the god; but the weapons of the state were used against the strongest rebels and the possibility cannot be ruled out that opponents went so far as to murder popular and outspoken *sants* like Tukaram and Mirabai.

Bhakti was indeed a revolt against the caste hierarchy of Brahmanic Hinduism, one that was often heroic for the individuals involved—but it was a revolt which ultimately simply testified to the existence of this hierarchy. Those who wanted to escape the framework whether it be Tukaram and Kabir, Nandanar and Cokhamela, or Bahenabai and Mirabai were in the end victimised by it. In contrast, Buddhism fought against a Brahmanism that was not yet in power and contested a caste system that had not yet solifidifed and in this sense it was not a 'revolt' in the sense that the bhakti movement was. Thus the conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism took place in a different way and had a very different significance.

The bhakti movements in many ways reflected the social conditions of the long millennium between the 8th and 18th centuries. It was a period when Islam represented a dominant political force and also a spiritual alternative; but since all Muslim kings (like

earlier 'barbarian' kings before them) maintained an alliance with the indispensable high-caste councillors and administrators, they continued to enforce Brahmanic social norms in the society at large. Medieval forms of Islam were also limited in their equalitarianism. In contrast to the emerging dynamic society of classical Buddhism of earlier period, the India of this period was an enclosed and stagnant society, with the realities of caste now enveloping the lives of most people in the subcontinent. This was the context for the devotionalism of bhakti, for the prevalence of emotionalism and ecstasy in contrast to the emphasis on dispassion, self-control and ethical behaviour in early Buddhism. It was only British colonialism that opened up a new path of revolt and a basis for the restoration of Buddhism.

7

Colonial Challenges, Indian Responses and Buddhist Revival

The Challenge of Colonial Rule

> Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind....
>
> The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.... All old established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries...that no longer work on indigenous raw materials, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home but in every quarter of the globe.... The intellectual creation of individual nations become common property. National onesidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature....
>
> The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out

> of the ground—what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?

So wrote Marx and Engels in one of the most influential writings of all time, *The Communist Manifesto*. Their description of capitalism and its global effects brings out the new challenges that were brought before India by British colonial rule.

These challenges were of three types. First, it was a rule that was 'foreign' in a way never felt before. Muslims, and before them 'barbarians', many of them born outside India, had ruled the country for centuries, had founded dynasties. The imperialism of the capitalist era was qualitatively different. Earlier conquerors, whatever their origin, had settled in India and become Indians. None had been subordinate to political centers outside the subcontinent. British rule, however, remained foreign, with the subcontinent of India subordinated to an island in Europe whose Colonial Office continued to make policy in the interests of that island, not even in the interests of the section of its inhabitants settled in India.

This was possible because of the industrial power of the developing European nation-states. Industrialism resulting from harnessing human invention to the forces of production, unleashed new productive powers. Machinery, mass production, new communications, shortened periods of transportation, railroads, printing presses, new weapons, all were qualitatively different from what had been known before. These confronted all backward societies, colonised or not, with the new challenge of developing the machinery, technology and science that was needed to stand up against world powers. Control over vast, wealthy agrarian tracts and armies of millions were no longer sufficient; industrialisation became a necessity.

Along with these political and economic challenges, as *The Communist Manifesto* makes clear, capitalist industrialisation presented an intellectual and moral challenge. The immense forces of change represented by the new means of production made it impossible to maintain any version of the harmonies and stabilities proclaimed by feudal ideologies. 'All that is solid' was everywhere melting into air; for good or ill, human beings stood revealed as forces of change and controllers of nature. Old religions and legitimations were being question. The new ideas of the Enlightenment—individualism, reason, progress and the slogans of the French Revolution—liberty, equality, fraternity, all began to resound, and

the power of the press, of 'print capitalism', meant they were heard as never before. They were becoming open to possession by Indians themselves; they could be used, by the elite to challenge British rule or by the masses to challenge elite rule. The 'soberness' which Marx and Engels point out—the disdain for the magical enchantments of the feudal imagination, the dismisal of 'supernatural' entities, the search for scientific explanations—did not immediately mean a rejection of old religions, but it did require their reinterpretation.

Thus, though many apparent similarities existed between the cautious way adopted by the British and their Muslim forebearers to deal with the complexity of Indian society, the very pervasiveness of the new ideas and the forces of production backing them up meant that the situation had irrevocably changed. British courts could go on implementing Brahmanic laws especially after the 1857 revolt, out of the fear of unleashing too many forces of change and resistance in Indian society, but British judges and officials could no longer believe that these were really just.

Similarly, Muslim rulers and foreign visitors had earlier taken interest in Indian religions, in discourses, in the sacred texts. But it was under the British that these were not simply studied, but published. Texts like the Vedas, previously forbidden for Shudras to even hear, were now translated and made available publicly. The British engaged in their own self-justifying historiography, classifying Indian populations, speculating on origins, writing self-justifying histories that were often immersed in racist and outmoded ideas, yet representing a new challenge because of their accessibility to Indians of all types. Indians now had to justify their own history and society in ways that they never had had to do before; and they had to do so with at least some reference to the new Enlightenment values and ideas—which were now coming not simply from foreign rulers, but from their own countrymen.

Responses to the new situation varied. It was a deeply divided Indian society which confronted the challenges of colonial rule. In contrast to China, where mobility into the gentry had existed, or to the fierce ethnocentrism of the Japanese, in India caste had created a unique, birth-defined gap between the elites and masses. The elites could be defined as the 'twice-born' in varna terms, the Brahmans, the Kshatriyas (that is, all those who could claim status as rulers and warriors) and the Vaishyas, now comprising merchants.

On the other side of the barrier were the vast majority of peasants, craftsmen, labourers of all kinds. The majority of these were given the varna classification as Shudra, but the purity–pollution barrier had in addition created an absolute impure group, called generally untouchables. In spite of the wide variations within each categories, hierarchies within hierarchies; in spite of disputes and uncertainties about the place of many jatis within the accepted hierarchy, the general categories remained important. India represented on the whole a 'three-strata' society: the 'twice-born' comprising the birth-defined elite as contrasted with the 'masses'; but within the 'masses' another significant category divided Bahujans (the 'clean' Shudras) from Dalits (the 'unclean').

Imperialism definitely benefited the elite; Brahmans adjusted to British rule as well as they had done to Muslim rule, and even made the same kind of alliance with the new rulers, who generally allowed the use of their courts to implement caste hierarchies in daily life. It was Brahmans who grabbed most of the benefits of education, who became proficient in the new skills, who formed the nationalist leadership. The spread of communications that was part of the new industrialism even allowed them to promote a greater and deeper penetration of caste ideas, though in a somewhat revised form. In contrast, the masses had little access to the new education or employment. Yet the new openness was crucial and movements grew throughout the 19th century, putting forward alternative ideologies and cultural systems that challenged caste and Brahmanism.

Elite Responses: Constructing 'Hinduism'

The response of the Brahmanic elite to colonial challenges was to emphasise the question of foreign rule and regain independence. The challenge of industrialisation and India's material backwardness was seen as the result of imperialism and proposed to be met first by an emphasis on 'swadeshi' and autonomy and then with proposals for a state-guided industrialisation (defined as 'socialism') once India gained independence. And the intellectual and moral challenges were sought to be deflated by a reconstruction and redefinition of a 'Hindu' identity.

Almost all intellectual histories of colonialism, written as they are either by the British or by the Indian elite, have stressed the role

of imperialism and the development of the independence movement and the formation of an independent nation-state as the important processes of the colonial period. Even the 'subaltern studies' school recently has emphasised only the actions of the peasantry and other exploited classes in this process, without seeing them making any contribution to the ideas and ideals of the times. (It has also defined 'class' in neo-Marxist terms and ignored the caste/gender aspects of subaltern identity). Only recently have a few studies from within the 'non-Brahman' tradition (Aloysius 1997; Geetha and Rajadurai 1998) and a few more well-known scholars (Chakravarty 1996; Sarkar 1997) begun to dissect the way in which non-elites dealt, at the intellectual level, with the challenges of colonialism, industrialisation, new ideas of equality and rationality, and national identity.

Recent studies, though, have provided many insights about the elites. Partha Chatterjee, for instance, has made the important point that Indians (meaning the elite) came to define their 'national' identity in terms of the inner, spiritual world that was their own, whereas in the outer, material realm they remained backward, exploited and discriminated against by the powers of colonial industrialism (Chatterjee 1993). This required both—protecting the inner world from the assaults of new ideas but at the same time reinterpreting it in ways that would be conducive to 'modernisation'.

Some European ideas proved useful. Thus, whereas 'science' seemed to challenge the notion of the divine origin of the social system of Brahmanism, the racism that was inherent in early theories of 'Aryan origin' could be turned around to justify it. The very classification of 'Indo-European' resulted from the linguistic similarities between Sanskrit and European languages, which in turn led to the postulation of early bands of heroic, pastoral Aryans coming into the subcontinent, giving birth to the Vedas, subjugating original dark-skinned inhabitants, and eventually developing a caste system in which the three 'twice-born' varnas were seen as of Aryan (i.e., 'European' descent) and the lower Shudras, untouchables and 'tribals' as descendants of the conquered natives. The British developed this racially-oriented 'Aryan theory' as an explanation of caste; and it initially served the 19th century upper-caste intellectuals, providing a 'scientific' basis to argue for the superiority of Brahmanic elites and their model of society. The admiration of many Europeans for early Aryan or Vedic society was welcomed, and aided in the idealisation of this society as a 'golden age' of

relative simplicity and heroism. The varna system was re-theorised as representing a basically stable, cooperative and harmonious society which had only degenerated with Muslim rule.

Nationalism was seen in cultural terms—as unity derived from a special religious and spiritual identity, and religion was seen as its essence. It was admitted that India was a racially and culturally diverse country, but the core of this diversity and its essential unity was embodied in a cultural stream which had its fountainhead in the Vedas and the Vedantic belief in a universal soul underlying all. 'Hindu'—a word which had originally had a geographical connotation (an Iranian mispronunciation of the river 'Sind' and the area beyond it) but which was gradually applied to the non-Muslim inhabitants of the subcontinent, and then used by the British to designate all who were not Muslims or Christians—was appropriated by the Brahmanic elite to identify their religion. It was given a national interpretation: 'Hinduism' was the religion of all the people, who may worship god in diverse images and ways, but all were now said to have in common 'national' deities such as Ram and an ultimate allegiance to a Vedantic supreme being.

It was within this framework that the debates over social reform developed. As historians like Sudhir Chandra have shown, there were strange overlaps between those characterised as 'orthodox' and those characterised as 'reformers' (Chandra 1994: 71–115). Both appealed to the same traditionally sacred texts; both sought to justify their position with reference to the ancient Vedic religion. Names such as the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj illustrated this. Some of this emerging elite appealed to the emotionalism of bhakti movements (Brahmans in the Prarthana Samaj in Pune, for instance, played the instruments and sought to work themselves into a trance). Reformers argued that bans on widow remarriage, sati and other apparently obnoxious customs were not really part of Vedic society but had developed as later 'excrescences', deriving from conditions of the time, for example the need to veil women and keep them protected from marauding Turks. This view became all-pervasive.

Even the low castes were urged to view Hinduism as 'theirs', to refuse conversion to an alien religion but instead try to reform their own degraded customs and fight the disabilities they suffered under.

The fact that the new ideology of 'Hindu nationalism' had spread so widely among the elite, that it formed the unquestioned framework of thinking of 'orthodox' and 'conservative' alike, of

nationalists and social reformers, can be seen in the writings of a man considered practically the father of 'Indian secularism'—Jawaharlal Nehru. In his influential *Discovery of India*, written while in prison, Nehru undertakes a vast interpretive survey of his country (see also Aloysius 1997: 155–62). He refuses to accept the 'conquest' aspect of the Aryan incursion and instead sees the 'great cultural synthesis and fusion…between the incoming Aryans and Dravidians' which produced the basic Indian culture, but he sees a 'wide gulf between the two' with the Aryans considering themselves 'vastly superior'. He cites the Rig Veda as the origin from which 'flow out the rivers of Indian thought and philosophy, of Indian life and culture.' Caste, to him, is a solution to the problem of organising the coexistence of different races (Nehru 1959: 39–47). In fact, he sees it as so central to Indian social life that its annihilation 'may well lead to a complete disruption of social life, resulting in the absence of cohesion, mass suffering and the development on a vast scale of abnormalities in individual behaviour, unless some other social structure, more suited to the times and the genius of the people, takes its place' (ibid.: 149).

This is indeed a warning against social reform! Caste is part of 'the genius of the Indian people', where the emphasis is on group life as opposed to western individualism. It has stood through the ages, and its power and cohesiveness derive from its functions! Brahmans, he argues, retain their prestige because of their learning. The idea of dharma, the basis of social order, 'stands out in marked contrast to the modern assertion of rights, rights of individuals, of groups, of nations' (ibid.: 52–53). In spite of wars and conquest, nationalism was an underlying theme of Indian history—from Chanakya and Chandragupta Maurya onwards, and Brahmanism was at the heart of it:

> in the ages since the Aryans had come down to what they called Aryavarta…the problem that faced India was to produce a synthesis between this new race and culture and the old race and civilization of the land. To that the mind of India devoted itself, and it produced an enduring solution built on the strong foundations of a joint Indo-Aryan culture. Other foreign elements came and were absorbed… [after periodic invasions] The reaction was essentially a nationalist one…. That mixture of religion and philosophy, history and tradition, custom and social structure, which in its wide fold included almost every aspect of the life of India then, and which might be called

> Brahmanism or (to use a later word) Hinduism, became the symbol of nationalism. It was indeed a national religion with its appeal to all those deep instincts, racial and cultural, which form the basis of nationalism today. Buddhism…was essentially international, a world religion, and as it developed and spread it became increasingly so. Thus it was natural for the old Brahmanic faith to become the symbol, again and again, of nationalist revivals (ibid.: 91–92).

Proclaiming Hinduism, or Brahmanism, as nationalism was the underlying theme of the 19th and 20th century development of the Indian nationalist movement.

Non-Brahman and Dalit Responses

While education under British rule was very heavily dominated by upper castes, some former 'Shudras' and ex-untouchables gradually began to get access. Some of these became spokesmen for new mass movements of emancipation. These movements took many forms, with Dalits joining non-Brahmans to demand access to education and public employment, and Dalits fighting on their own for land (usually demands were made for shares in the common or 'waste' lands of the village), for access to public water tanks and other facilities. At an ideological level, the movements' radical leaders, and especially the Dalits, cared little on the whole for the traditions of hierarchy that the elite were trying to maintain. For many of them, the European attack on Brahmanical dominance and superstitious backwardness provided welcome fuel for their own battles. The 'modernistic' themes of historical rationality and progress, along with the proclaimed values of the French revolution, were new ideological weapons, and they were not slow to use them. The fact that these often linked religious condemnations of Brahmanical teachings to racial theories of caste was, if anything, an added attraction.

One of the remarkable features of all low-caste movements from the 19th century was the search for an alternate dharma. They felt, in contrast to the elite, that the 'modern world' required a new and rationalistic religion that could not be provided by the developing construction of 'Hinduism'; in the 19th century this was interpreted as monotheism or deism. Many Dalits and Bahujans explored Advaita and the bhakti movement; some were attracted

to the Arya Samaj or Brahmo Samaj, but they had no inherent compulsions to defend the existing tradition. Some trends of conversion to Christianity developed; others sought to create their own mixed religion. The characteristics of the religion or moral foundation they sought had to include reason and equality—'Homo Hierarchus' was not for them. Beginning with the role played by Jotiba Phule, this chapter will trace this search for a rational and equalitarian religion which climaxed, at the close of the 19th century, with Buddhism itself.

But first it is necessary to look at a powerful, mass-based movement of social protest in Orissa, which was a transitional phase between medieval bhakti movements and the rise of modern revolutionary protest.

Orissa: Bhima Bhoi and the Revolt against Caste

Once at the forefront of Indian growth, leading in trade and commerce with southeast Asia and China, Orissa, included along with neighbouring Bengal in the same province, had been relegated to a backward position under colonialism. Commercial agriculture and industry were much slower to get established in the Oriya-speaking areas and because the British first established their foothold in Bengal, Bengalis quickly came to dominate in education and employment in the whole province. It was in this context that the Mahima Dharma movement in the 19th century represented a transition between a bhakti movement and modern social revolt, a revolt in traditional form against Brahmanical tyranny and superstition.

Its founder, known as Mahima Gosavi, began his preaching in 1862 in the former feudal states of Orissa. He preached a formless, unknowable, indescribable (*alekha*) *nirguna* deity, and refused any organisation except for two ways of ordaining his disciples, as *kaupinadhari* (cloth wearers) and *kumbhipatias* (bark wearers). He included Buddhist practices in his organisation, for instance begging for cooked food and holding a ceremony of confession, and did not recognise any caste distinctions. In the social turmoil caused by colonialism and a major famine in 1866, the movement succeeded in winning followers among the groups known today as

Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs in both western and coastal Orissa. It provided an alternative to conversion to Christianity for seekers of equality; it also had a missionary element; its revolt was unconcerned with colonialism and directed instead against the varna order (Pati 2001).

Bhima Bhoi, a poet who became the most famous follower of the movement, had been adopted into a Khond (Adivasi) family and was said to have been blind from birth, was converted in the 1860s. He met opposition from Brahmans, and was beaten up in his own village for begging for cooked food. He was also part of a major faction within the Mahima Dharma movement. Mahima Swami died in 1876 and after that there was a split, with Bhima Bhoi and a group of *kaupinadharis* building their own ashram (Eschmann 1978; Tripathi 1978).

Bhima Bhoi's work includes poetry, many Mahima bhajans, and several books. His writing stresses the welfare of the poor and downtrodden, and carries echoes of Mahayana Buddhism and the Bodhisattva ideal, especially as expressed by the 8th century Gujarati poet Shantideva, whose Sanskrit poetic work *Bodhicaryavarta*, famous throughout the Buddhist world up to China and Japan, concludes,

> May all those everywhere who are suffering bodily or mental pain
> obtain oceans of happiness and delight through my merits.
> May the blind see forms. May the deaf always hear.
> May pregnant women give birth without pain, like Mayadevi.
> May all have clothes, food, drink, ornaments of garlands and sandal-wood
> —whatever the mind desires that is good.
> May the sick be well. May the weak be strong.
> May all be released from bondage. May all have affectionate thoughts for each other.
> May all beings have unlimited life spans. May they always live happily.
> May even the word 'death' vanish!
> For as long as space endures and the world exists,
> may my own existence bring about the removal of the world's suffering'
> (X.2, 19–20, 22, 33, 55).

This statement of the Bodhisattva ideal was carried to an extreme in the most famous and widely quoted verse of Bhima Bhoi:

> Too much are the miseries of living beings,
> How can one tolerate it?
> Let my soul go to hell
> So that the world may be redeemed (Raj Kumar 1995).

According to many scholars, the Mahima Dharma movement not only represented the social protest of a wide section of the oppressed in Orissa, but because of its serious challenge to the varna order, the elite was 'terrified of it and located it with apocalyptic visions' (Pati 2001: 4207). That there was some reality behind this fear is shown in a famous mass protest that took place in 1881. This focused on the famous temple of Jagannath at Puri, which had been the center of 'Oriya' identity since the medieval period. Part of the 'crypto-Buddhism' discussed in the last chapter was expressed in the identification of Jagannath with Buddhism, with the three images described as 'Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha'. This was the background of the protest of a section of the Mahima Dharma cult.

A group of 12 men and three women, with a leader described as Dasaram, became involved in a rebellion against priestly control of the temple. After a long 'march' that gained much publicity, people entered the temple. The fanatic fear of the elite was shown in reports later that they had had the intention of taking out the idol and burning it. It seems that in fact the group had only carried a pot of boiled rice and wanted to eat it in the temple—a symbol of the breaking of caste restrictions. Popular tradition ever since has associated Bhima Bhoi as the leader of this movement. This was an early 'direct action', challenging the exclusion of low castes from major temples. It seems very mild in comparison to the hysteria it provoked in the press of the time and the legendary quality it has gained in Orissa—but its importance is in its being a precursor of more thoroughgoing and ideologically articulated anti-caste movements.

Jotiba Phule: The Universal Religion of Truth

Jotirao Phule (1827–1890) is considered a founder not only of the anti-caste movement in India as a whole, but also of the farmers' movement and even the women's movement in Maharashtra. He

was born in a Mali (gardener caste) community of Maharashtra, and educated first in his village, then at Pune, at that time the centre of cultural and political stirrings. While he was for a time inclined to nationalism, he quickly became disillusioned with its Brahman leadership, and instead embarked on a career as social reformer intending to awaken the 'Shudras and Ati-Shudras' to the reality of their slavery and their destiny. His initial efforts involved starting schools for untouchables and girls in 1849 and 1951. Then in 1875 he founded the Satyashodhak Samaj or 'Truth-Seekers' society, which was his answer to the various organised groups, such as the Prarthana Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj of the elite. Its purpose was to fight priestly domination, especially by organising social-religious ceremonies without them; it also encouraged the education of both boys and girls and promoted gender equality with a quite radical version of the marriage ceremony. This movement gained some influence in Bombay and in Pune district, and he collected around him a group of young radicals, led mostly by Malis in the city and Maratha-Kunbis from the rural areas, but including a wide range of Shudra castes, while maintaining links with emerging Dalit leaders.

Phule's first major polemical work, *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) was published in 1873. In it he turned the 'Aryan theory' of European origin upside down to unleash a harsh attack on Brahmanism in all its guises. As noted, the discovery of the linguistic relationship between Sanskrit and the European languages was linked to the identification of racial ethnic groups and conquest. In interpreting caste in this way, the British identified the three upper varnas (Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya) as descended from the Vedic Aryans (that is, as racially akin to Europeans) while the lower castes were thought to be descended from conquered, dark-skinned indigenous peoples. While initially the elite used this to claim their own relationship to Europeans, Phule turned it upside down. In a period of emerging nationalist political organisation, while the nationalists were attacking British imperialism, Phule described the 'Arya Bhat-Brahmans' as the first conquerors. As his English introduction to *Gulamgiri* put it:

> The extreme fertility of the soil in India, its rich productions, the proverbial wealth of its people, and the other innumerable gifts which this favoured land enjoys, and which have more recently tempted the

> cupidity of the Western nations, no doubt attracted the Aryans, who came to India not as simple emigrants with peaceful intentions of colonization, but as conquerors. They appear to have been a race imbued with very high notions of self, extremely cunning, arrogant and bigoted....The aborigines who the Aryans subjugated, or displaced, appear to have been a hardy and brave people from the determined front which they offered to these interlopers....The wars of devas and Daityas, or the Rakshasas, about who so many fictions have been found scattered over the sacred books of the Brahmans, have certainly a reference to this primeval struggle.... (Phule 1991: 118–19).

Thus, the concept of Aryan conquest proved a means by which Phule could interpret, undermine and replace Brahmanic teachings. His own historical–theoretical explanation was predominantly materialistic: the Aryans had unleashed raids into India, prompted by greed; had conquered due to military technological advantages (the bow and the horse-driven chariot), and had maintained their rule through the use of religious sanctions and by banning education for the conquered. The religion conceived by the Aryans was one of superstition, ritual and purity–pollution concerns, but their puranic legends were seen by Phule as having their material basis in the process of conquest and rule. Thus, for example, the nine *avatars* of Vishnu were seen simply as stages in the 'Arya Bhat-Brahman' assault: first the attack by sea (the tortoise), then by land (the boar), then through trickery, and finally slaughter (Parasuram's legendary killing off of all Kshatriyas).

The legend of Raja Bali provided Phule's alternative 'golden age' of India. In the story of the *avatars*, King Bali is a demon or *raksasa*, a king who is tricked by the dwarf Waman into giving him a boon. Waman asks for all that can be covered in three steps—then puts one on the earth, the second on the sky, the third on Bali Raja's chest to push him under the earth. Among Maharashtrian farmers, however, and in regions such as Kerala, Bali is described as an ideal beneficent king, illustrated by the Marathi saying *ida pida javo, Balica rajya yevo* ('let troubles and sorrows go and the kingdom of Bali come!'), Phule considers Bali as a ruler of India at the time of the assumed Aryan invasion, and depicts it be such a 'Golden Age' that he continually uses the name 'Balisthan' for India as an alternative to 'Hindustan'. Through this conception of Raja Bali, Phule integrated many of the popular peasant deities of Maharashtra. 'Khandoba', 'Jotiba', 'Vithoba' and others were seen as governors and feudatories and warriors in the great realm of Raja Bali.

Phule's second major work, *Shetkaryaca Asud* (The Whipcord of the Cultivator) published in 1882, extended these themes into a critique of British colonialism. This depicted the bureaucracy as the greatest exploiter of the 'Shudra and Ati-Shudra' farmers; and the bureaucracy itself was seen as an alliance of the 'lazy indolent white English government employees' and the 'cunning Arya Bhat-Brahman black government employees.' As Phule saw it, the lazy English, ill-informed about the country they ruled, simply let their Brahman subordinates loot the peasants in their name. Along with religious extortions, quarrels were instigated in the villages by the cunning Brahmans, factions were created among the peasantry, fights incited, and once the case went to court all the clan of Brahmans at every level united to loot both sides. Along with this cheating, taxes, cess, octroi and all kinds of funds were extorted from the peasants, their land was take over by the 'gigantic' Forest Department so that 'peasants had not even an inch of land left to graze even a goat', and nothing was done to develop agriculture; consequently the masses of people were being ruined.

Phule took nationalist themes quite seriously. In *Shetkaryaca Asud* he discussed the way in which the peasantry and artisans were ruined by foreign competition, and criticised the loans taken from European 'moneylenders' for irrigation schemes for which the farmers were overcharged and even then left without water as it never actually reaching their fields. But, he attacked the nationalists' solution of *swadeshi*, which was beginning to be proclaimed at the time. Phule's solution was different. For him, in contrast to the developing themes of 'economic nationalism' which emphasised autarchy, exchange and trade with other lands were foundations for development and for building understanding among peoples; in fact cutting off such commerce between peoples was one of the means Brahmans had always used to maintain their power. The solution to the problem of competition, he insisted, was not expulsion of the foreigners and closure of the country, but rather education, and access to technology.

The emphasis on education and technology was consistent with his fundamental view of human beings, in which intelligence was the major distinguishing feature:

> Now… aside from knowledge, humans and all other animals are basically alike in their nature. Animals need food, sleep and sexual

> intercourse; they raise their young, protect themselves from their enemies and understand nothing aside from belching after they have eaten; and since there is not a speck of change in this constant behavior of theirs, there is no upheaval or basic change in their original condition. However, one marvellous specialty in the nature of human beings is intelligence. With its help, they have won superiority over all the fish, animals, birds, insects and other creatures; and with this intelligence they have invented the system of writing to put their thoughts down on paper. After this, since the people of the continents all around have kept note of all their experiences up to today, there has grown up a huge mass of experienced knowledge in the world, and with the help of this experiential knowledge and their intelligence, the Europeans send their important messages through telegraph wires thousands of miles to inform each other and bring lakhs of tons of grain by boat and train in the time of drought to save each other. And in the midst of such intelligent human beings, the Sudra Shivaji brought to ruin the Muslim Badshah who worships one god and advised the farmers to take care of all the cows and the Brahmans and their self-interested religion! (Phule 1991: 396).

Thus it was that by preventing the Dalits from using their intelligence, by denying them education the Brahmans maintained their power; and the 'swadeshi' alternative was attractive to them because it left them with a captive population over which to exercise hegemony.

Phule also gave what could be called a materialistic alternative to the orthodox Theravada Buddhist chain of causality. Like this, Phule's causal chain also began with 'ignorance'; he used the term '*vidya*' (Pali *vijja*), but treated it as knowledge gained through education: *vidyavihin mati geli; mativihin gati geli; gativihin vitta geli; vitavihin sudra kacle* ('Without education wisdom was lost; without wisdom development was lost; without development wealth was lost; without wealth the shudras were ruined') (ibid.: 353). Thus, he argued for compulsory universal primary education, with teachers trained from among the 'Shudras and Ati-Shudras' themselves, and with a course of studies that included both simple Marathi and training in agriculture and artisanship.

Phule's feminism, very advanced for his age, was shown ideologically in the strong defense of women raised in two pamphlets entitled *Satsar*, published in 1885 and focusing particularly on the two great women leaders of his time, Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde.

Though Phule had an all-around approach, political and economic as well as cultural, he came back constantly to religious and cultural themes. His critique of Brahmanic Hinduism attacked not only the caste divisions that it created and maintained, but also its ritualism, legends, sacred books and festivals. The first chapter of *Shetkaryaca Asud* is a scathing description of the various festivals that occur throughout the year, as well as the life-cycle rituals of a good 'Hindu', each and every one of which are used by Brahmans to claim gifts and food—another 'Brahman feast of ghee and goodies'. To Phule, in fact, 'Hinduism' was not a true religion at all; the adjectives he used to describe it were 'self-interested' (*matlabi*), 'artificial' (*krutrim*) and 'counterfeit' (*banavati*). Thus, finding a true religion was a major part of the freeing of the masses from the yoke of Brahmanic slavery. Just as Ambedkar's final and major book was to be *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, so the concluding written work of Phule's life also focused on religion—*The Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak*, published just after his death. In it he gave a savage critique of the Vedas, the Ramayana and Mahabharata stories, and undertook the effort to formulate a religious alternative.

What could this alternative be? All of Phule's writings give indications of several important criteria: a true religion should be universal; it should be founded on reason and truth and rejection of superstition, i.e., it should be suitable for a scientific age; it should be anti-ritualistic; it should be ethical; it should be equalitarian, not recognising caste or ethnic differences, and especially admitting the equality of women. (Among the few 'rituals' he did write was a wedding ceremony where the verses, or *mangalastaka*, have the wife first asking for equal rights and the husband promising them, and finally with the two together vowing to serve other human beings). And, in the context of 19th century thinking, where Thomas Paine represented the height of radicalism, he also felt that a religion had to be monotheistic.

Phule knew little about Buddhism. His interpretation was summarised in a passage in *Shetkaryaca Asud:*

> One might wonder how farmers could be so ignorant as to be looted up until today by the Bhat-Brahmans. My answer to this is that when the original Arya Bhat-Brahman regime was started in this country, they forbade knowledge to the shudras and so have been able to loot them at will for thousands of years. Evidence for this will be found in

> such self-interested literature of theirs as the manusmriti. After some years, four disinterested holy wise men who disliked the prolonged misfortune founded the Buddhist religion and campaigned against the artificial religion of the Arya Brahmans to free the ignorant shudra farmers from the noose of the Aryabhats. Then the chief head of the aryas, the great cunning Shankaracharya, engaged in a wordy battle with the gentlemen of Buddhist religion and made great efforts to uproot them from hindustan. However, rather than the goodness of Buddhism being threatened even a mite, that religion kept growing day by day. Then finally Shankaracharya absorbed the turks among the marathas and with their help destroyed the buddhist religion by the sword. Afterwards the Arya Bhatjis, by banning eating beef and drinking alcohol, were able to impose an awe on the minds of the ignorant farmers through the help of Vedamantras and all kinds of magical tricks (ibid.: 236–37).

This made some important points: Buddhist non-violence, the role played by Sankaracharya and bhakti devotionalism in combating Buddhism; but it missed the essence of the Buddha's teachings. Phule evidently also confused Buddhism with Jainism, referring at times to the 'Buddhist Marwaris' in his books. In this sense, while his image of Buddhism was very favourable, he never saw it as a viable religious alternative. Centuries of Brahmanic dominance had wiped it out of historical memory; and the new impact of the universalistic religions of Islam and Christianity had made it difficult to imagine a religion not based on a supreme deity.

Phule's *sarvajanik satyadharma* (public religion of truth) was a constructed monotheism postulating a vague but loving 'Creator'. It won few adherents. His general anti-Brahman cultural radicalism was too much for significant numbers of people in his time; even his closest Mali companions, Bhalekar and Lokhande, worked apart from him, Lokhande focusing on workers in Bombay, and Bhalekar becoming alienated and trying to form an organisation concentrating only on education and reforms. Yet, though he died without apparently making much of a significant impact on his era, he opened up the way to a new one.

Buddhist Revival: Scholars and Searchers

While Phule himself had only a bare knowledge of the role of Buddhism in Indian history, by the end of his life, a significant

revival of interest in Buddhism was taking place among Indian and European intellectuals which was to make this religion much more accessible to concerned social radicals.

An important role in this was played by non-Indians. While Max Muller and others had lauded the Vedas, there were also many Europeans who looked to Buddhism as the true wisdom of the East, and this interest and their researches helped to make Buddhist texts available in India itself. Among these were colonel H.S. Olcott and the Russian H.P. Blavatsky, who founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875 and immediately began to contact Asian Buddhists, such as David Hewavitarne who had just taken on Christian missionaries in an important mass public debate in Ceylon. The involvement of such Europeans and Americans helped to give legitimacy to Buddhism, which had been under attack in countries like Ceylon (Sangharakshata 1980). Olcott toured the Ceylon countryside in 1886 with the young Hewavitarne, as a result of which Hewavitarne quit his clerical job and, as Anagarika Dharmapala, became one of the most important leaders of a revivalistic and nationalistic Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

In terms of scholarship and making Buddhist literature widely available, the major role was played by the British scholar Thomas William Rhys David. He founded the Pali Text Society in 1881, which brought out many of the Pali canon in translation. Under Rhys David's leadership, nearly 25,000 pages of translated material were published. Later in life he married Caroline Augusta Foley (C.A.F. Rhys Davids), a scholar in her own right.

In 1891 Dharmapala visited India and the traditional places of Buddhist pilgrimage in India, and decided to take up the work of restoring Bodh Gaya, the site of the Enlightenment. Bengalis in India, including Bengali Theosophists and Sarat Chandra Das, became his co-workers, and in 1891 the Maha Bodhi Society was founded in Colombo. This was to become the most important Buddhist association in India up to the time of Ambedkar. In 1893 Dharmapala attended the historic 'Parliament of World Religions' held in Chicago (among other famous Asians was, of course, Vivekananda). This provided an opportunity for an exchange of ideas, and helped to bring the ideas of Buddhism to a world forum, as well as promote it in India itself.

It was perhaps fitting that the revival of Buddhism in India itself began in Bengal, in eastern India where the original Buddhism had

survived for the longest. The earliest scholars working on Buddhism were Bengalis, including Rajendralal Mitra (1824–1891) and a younger scholar, Hari Prasad Shastri, whose book *Discovery of Living Buddhism in Bengal* appeared in 1897. Finally Sarat Chandra Das, a scholar-explorer who had traveled in Tibet and studied Tibetan Buddhism, published over 50 articles and books, including an edition of the Dhammapada. In 1882 Das founded a journal for the Buddhist Text Society, and in 1893 he was entrusted by Anagarika Dharmapala with the editorship of the *Maha Bodhi Journal* when Dharmapala went to Chicago. While the earliest work of Bengali intellectuals on Buddhism was on Sanskrit texts, Pali was instituted at the university of Calcutta around the turn of the century, and the first M.A. was awarded in 1901 (Zelliot 1979: 390).

In western India, there were a few who began to take an interest around the 1880s. The renowned scholar R.G. Bhandarkar had included Buddhism in his Indological interests from 1978 onwards, while among popular writers on Buddhism was the non-Brahman reformer, Krishnarao Arjun Keluskar, who published a life of the Buddha in 1898; a copy of this book was later presented to Ambedkar, which is how he was introduced to Buddhism. A serialised life of the Buddha also appeared in a popular children's magazine.

While none of these early scholars became formal Buddhists, Dharmanand Kosambi, the most famous of these early Buddhist-minded intellectuals, did. (He was the second Indian to take the *diksha*; the first was a remarkable man who after having been involved in the 1857 revolt as a youth, fled to Sri Lanka, and was ordained in 1890 as Mahavira. He worked in Kushinara, and his Burmese associate lived to become the man who ordained Ambedkar in 1956, as the oldest living Buddhist in India). Born in Goa in 1876, Kosambi's interest was stimulated by popular writing in a children's magazine, and at the age of 32 he left home, going to Poona, Gwalior, Banaras and finally Nepal, to trace out the Buddha's birthplace. A long pilgrimage resulted in his ordination in 1902, though in the end he returned to a household life. He lived in Ceylon, Madras, Burma and again in Poona, touring Buddhist sites of northern India and teaching for a time at Calcutta. His most important work was *Bhagwan Buddha*, published in 1940, which influenced Ambedkar's rational interpretation of the

Buddha's life. Kosambi also made an effort to popularise Buddhism, and spent some time trying to start a vihara in Bombay, the Bahujan Vihara, which was designed to appeal to the Bombay working class (ibid.: 389–399). Dharmananda's son was the famous D.D. Kosambi, still considered the leading Marxist historian of India.

The major breakthrough in the mass revival of Buddhism in the land of its birth took place, however, in Tamil Nadu. The credit for this goes to a remarkable Dalit leader, Pandit Iyothee Thass—who carried on the search for religious identity begun by Phule, and took it to the revival of Buddhism itself. With Iyothee Thass, the Buddhist revival leapt over the boundaries of *bhadralok* and Brahman intellectual interest, and established itself among the primarily Dalit masses in the context of the assertion of a Tamil, non-Hindu identity.

Iyothee Thass and Sakya Buddhism in Tamil Nadu

The life of Pandit Iyothee Thass (1845–1914) shows a remarkable convergence of many themes: the great Dravidian movement in south India, the firm equalitarianism and Enlightenment heritage pioneered by Phule, and finally the re-establishment of Buddhism in India, this time as the religion of Dalits.

Iyothee Thass was a Paraiya, trained as a traditional Tamil Siddha physician—which itself had its roots in Tantra and in Buddhism. His search for spiritual alternatives began quite early. In 1870, at the age of 25, he organised the lower castes of the Nilgiris region into an Advaithananda Sabha, with a view to examining the Advaita tradition as a resource for overcoming caste and varna disabilities. But, due to an experience of rejection by upper caste Hindus, Advaita was seen as insufficient. And, in contrast to Phule, there had been enough revival of Buddhism and availability of Buddhist ideas by the end of the 19th century for Iyothee Thass to turn to the Dhamma as an alternative to the Brahmanic *varnashrama dharma*. Thus he began to take an interest in Buddhism.

Iyothee Thass had from early years challenged the caste system. In 1881 he demanded that the original inhabitants (that is, Dalits) be recorded in the census as 'original Tamils' rather than by their

caste name. In 1886 he published a manifesto arguing that Dalits were not Hindus. And in 1891, he came in open conflict with the nationalist movement when he attempted to bring a petition for the removal of caste distinctions before the National Congress. At a public meeting, demands for temple entry were rejected with outcries from Brahman nationalists that 'you have your own gods, Vishnu and Shiva are not for you!' (Aloysius 1998: 152).

By 1890 Iyothee Thass had become convinced, through studies of his own, of the truth and significance of Buddhism. He sought out Colonel Olcott of the Theosophical society, at that time running a number of 'free schools' in Madras. In 1898 he went to Sri Lanka along with one P. Krishnaswamy a teacher in one of the 'free schools'. As Olcott records in his diary, 'they represented that their race was the aborigines of this part of India, and at the time of the Emperor Asoka, they were Buddhists' (quoted Aloysius 1998: 51). The Dalit representatives received a warm welcome, and on their return established the Sakya Buddhist Society. The very name indicates a claim to heritage, for they believed that the Valluva Sakya subcaste of Paraiyas were descendents of Siddhartha's own Sakya clan.

The Sakya Buddhist Society (also known as the South Indian Buddhist Association) attracted both Dalits and non-Dalits, but found its mass base in Paraiyas, and spread whereever these were migrating as labourers in the world market under colonialism—to Burma, to South Africa. In India itself, the longest-living branch was that established in the Kolar Gold Fields, where Paraiyas worked as miners.

Many aspects of Iyothee Thass' interpretation of history were similar to Phule's. Like Phule, Iyothee Thass used the 'Aryan theory' in reverse, characterising Brahmans as the 'Aryan mlecchas' who had entered the country and enslaved what had been a free, equalitarian and prosperous people. Like others in the developing Dravidian movement, he identified 'Non-Aryan' with Dravidian or Tamil, seeing Buddhism as their ancient religion, spread throughout the subcontinent. Iyothee Thass' approach, however was slightly different from that of Phule. In contrast to Phule's emphasis on conquest and subordination, Iyothee Thass emphasised the infiltration of the 'Arya-mlecchas', and their takeover of what were originally indigenous Tamil contributions. Thus the 'Vedas' were identified as originally Buddhist oral ethical books; various popular

gods and goddesses were interpreted as great human beings, great Buddhists, who had achieved nirvana and in the process helped the people. For instance, a popular goddess, Ambika Amman, was identified as a bhikkhuni who had aided people during a smallpox epidemic, while popular festivals of Tamil Nadu were linked to the Buddhist tradition. This was intended to combat the way in which Brahmanism had absorbed (or 'co-opted') many popular deities, to maintain but reinterpret popular mass religious and ceremonial practices. These general themes of Iyothee Thass formed the radical cultural–historical critique that gave thrust to the later mass, political Dravidian movement (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: 91–108).

Like Phule also, Iyothee Thass was a fierce critic of the swadeshi movement, which took on a strong organised form in agitations in the early 20th century. The columns in the Tamil journal of Iyothee Thass, mostly written by himself, were titled 'Swadeshi reform' and attacked the hypocrisy of Brahmans, whose continual exclusion of Dalits and non-Brahmans was in contrast to their claim to be leaders of nationalism. He argued that the 'inner spirit' of swadeshi and swaraj ('self-rule', a term popularised by the Maharashtrian radical nationalist Lokmanya Tilak) was based on four sorts of pride: caste pride, religious pride, the pride of knowledge and pride coming from wealth. What needed to be boycotted was not foreign cloth, but caste hatred, prejudice that resulted in burning the houses of the poor and destroying their gods and rituals. He was also critical of those who opposed the 'indentured labour' under which Paraiah's migrated to distant lands—because in fact such migration was an escape from the reality of village slavery. Brahmanic knowledge was 'really useless', he argued, since it had never taken up practical arts of agronomy, irrigation and transport. Finally, swadeshi nationalism had no viable alternatives to propose to poverty and economic misery (ibid.: 62–70). Iyothee Thass was in fact very similar to Phule not only in his interpretation of Aryan conquest and the origin of the caste system, but in his critique of Brahman nationalism and his insistence on education, openness (including openness in trade, exchange of goods and ideas). As Geetha and Rajadurai have noted, citing his journalistic writings, for the Adi Dravidas who suffered under feudal forms of oppression,

> it was not only the liberal rule of law in British India, which granted them the status of persons and the right to a hearing by a neutral

> arbitrative body—the law courts—but the very principles of free trade, property and work which underwrote and justified that rule which seemed attractive (ibid.: 72).

Iyothee Thass' interpretation of Buddhism also took up redefinitions of what have been considered to be basic teachings of Buddhism. He and his companions were not ready, in a modern 'scientific' age, to accept the notions of karma and rebirth, particularly since these had been used in the Brahmanic framework to define their untouchability. The interpretation of karma and rebirth made by the votaries of 'Sakya Buddhism' seems to have paved the way for Ambedkar's rejection of it. For example, saying that 'activity as desire is the cause of birth', Iyothee Thass wrote,

> There is nothing everlasting in this world; and there is no 'soul' or 'self' in those born as human beings; it is about this, the compassionate Buddha preached on the origin of the world—*sarvan anityam, sarvan anathmam, nirvanam shatam*; the world moves in accordance with 'activity'; those who are born as human beings too, are born, live and die in accordance with it; in this whirlpool of human life what is stable is *saththanmam* or the activity/life in accordance with *thanman* [Dhamma]. Death itself is the disintegration of the five elements of which all human bodies are composed. And as it is inevitable for every life to come to an end, sorrow is not called for.... (quoted by Aloysius 1998: 115).

This is a slightly different version of the 'three characteristics'. Impermanence and non-self are cited, *dukkha* or sorrow is ignored, and 'non-self' is explicitly connected with the denial of rebirth. As another Tamil Buddhist, G. Appadinaiyar later explained, 'Wherever one's thought, words or deeds are to be found influencing others, there one takes a rebirth' (Aloysius 1998: 148).

More explicitly, in *The Essence of Buddhism,* Iyothee Thass' co-worker Laxmi Narasu in 1907 wrote

> That in the personal development of each individual every thought or volition counts for something is not difficult to perceive; but that there is a retribution in wrong and selfishness after death, when there is no transmigrating *atma,* can have no meaning and validity apart from the individual's relation to mankind as a whole. Physiologically considered, an individual reincarnates in his progeny, and his physical *karma* is

> transmitted to them. Ethically considered, the psychic life of an individual cannot be separated from the psychic life of the community of which he is a member.... How, then, can a man have *karma* apart from other human beings? The enjoyments and sufferings of an individual are not always the result of his special karma. The *Milindapanha* tells us that it is an erroneous extension of the truth when the ignorant declare that 'every pain is the fruit of (individual) *karma*.' Yet no Buddhist will deny that everything is under the sway of causality. Unless we regard all mankind as linked together as part of one universal whole, we cannot perceive the full significance of the doctrine of *karma*.... The life of the individual has no other possible measure than that of its significance, its influence and its value to other individuals (Narasu 1950: 191).

This was a 'modern' interpretation which paved the way for Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism.

Towards Buddhism?

During the time of Iyothee Thass, his 'Sakya Buddhism' spread, mostly with Paraiya migration, with a strong branch in the Kolar gold mines area, and branches also in Burma and South Africa. It found its support largely among those Paraiyas who had become urbanised, moving away from their traditional village occupations and finding themselves in a new life. The organisation gradually died away; but the ferment in south India began to bring Buddhism as a possibility before many in the Dalit and anti-caste movements.

Thus in the 1920s, conversion to Buddhism was debated among social reformers in the Ezhava community in Kerala, with many arguing that Ezhavas were descendents of the Buddha (Sahadevan 1993: 48). In Hyderabad also, Dalit leaders like Bhagyareddy Varma began to be attracted to Buddhism. Finally, in Tamil Nadu itself, the emerging leader of the militant anti-Brahman movement, E.V. Ramasamy ('Periyar') associated with the Sakya Buddhist movement during his early career as a Tamil nationalist. He was a frequent visitor to the Kolar gold fields during the period where his discontent with Congress was crystallising and he was about to launch the Self-Respect Movement; he spoke from many Buddhist platforms and his journal exchanged news, contributions and articles

with the Sakya Buddhist journal *Tamilan*. The first Self-Respect General Conference, in fact, was held under the auspices of the Kolar branches of the Buddhist society in 1932, with Periyar's movement in many ways taking off from Tamil Buddhism. It is thus understandable that for a long time he expressed a sympathy to Buddhism, as distinct from the other religions which he criticised (Aloysius 1998: 191–93).

However, in the end these developments came to a halt by the 1930s. After their discussions of Buddhism, most of the Kerala Ezhava leaders rejected it; the influential Ezhava religious reformer, Shree Narayana Guru, adopted instead an expansive form of Vedanta with his slogan 'one god, one caste, one religion for mankind'. The temples set up by his society, the Shree Narayana Dharma Paripalan (SNDP), resembled Hindu temples, with installation of all kinds of idols, that is with many aspects of a 'syndicated Hinduism'. In Tamil Nadu itself, the Sakya Buddhist society began to be marginalised; it faded away after 1916 as the non-Brahman movement emerged as a powerful political movement, but one dominated by elite non-Brahmans. The more radical Periyar turned to atheism. In Maharashtra, similarly, while there was a revival of the Satyashodhak Samaj from 1910 to 1930 and a powerful political non-Brahmanism in the 1920s, this largely ignored Phule's *sarvajanik satya dharma*. Its most powerful patron and symbol, Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur state, became himself a member of the Arya Samaj, and other leaders often described themselves as reformist Hindus. The leaders of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra before Ambedkar tended to focus on Cokhamela as their forerunner, through this and some were drawn into support for Hindu Mahasabha activities.

In the north, the Dalit movements of the time, though strongly carrying on the themes of being 'original inhabitants' enslaved by invading Aryans who imposed a false religion, tended to turn to a militant version of bhakti. Here the egalitarian focus of Kabir and Ravidas was important. This can be seen in the themes of Acchutananda, a Chamar leader of Uttar Pradesh:

> I believe that God is only one…and formless…Neither is there any book of His; nor does he incarnate, nor is there any image of His…
> I believe that I am an autochthon of Bharat; hence I am an adi-Hindu…

> I believe that the religion of saints is the original religion of Bharat...
> I believe that all human beings are equal, and brothers...; the feeling of high and low is an illusion. Humans become high and low by their own [individual] virtues and vices...
> I believe that giving up lust, greed, attachment...is one's [true] personal religion...
> I believe that according to the teachings of Kabir all the Brahman's scriptures (dharma grantha) are based on selfishness, falsehood and injustice...I will never have our rites of birth, tonsure ceremony, marriage and death performed by a Brahman (quoted Khare 1984: 84).

This includes a strong rejection of the rites, rituals and sacred texts of the Brahmanic tradition. It asserts equality and individualism in spiritual matters; it suggests that greed or thirst is what must be given up; it seeks to substitute the 'company of saints' for other religious institutions. This seems to have been strongly influenced by Kabir's *nirguna bhakti*. Yet, as Hawley and Juergensmeir have noted in their introductions to Kabir and Ravidas' songs (1988: 16–23, 46–49), there have been strong ongoing processes of absorption which turn these great rebels into figures of worship within what can be interpreted as a pantheon of 'Hinduisation'.

In conclusion, the 19th and early 20th centuries gave birth to powerful currents of cultural-religious radicalism which underlay the anti-caste movements of Dalits and non-Brahmans. As these moved towards an alternative religion, the Buddhist alternative became increasingly attractive. However there were also counter-currents which pulled Dalits and non-Brahmans back into a Brahmanic framework. The greatest ideological support for this backward pull was to come in the 20th century first from Gandhian Hindu reformism and finally, from the wave of Marxist radicalism which disdained all 'religious' solutions in its hopes for a proletarian revolution. As the greatest Indian of the millennium, Bhimrao Ambedkar, rose up from among those whom the dominant tradition of his country considered untouchable, he had to confront both of these in formulating a Buddhist alternative.

8

Navayana Buddhism and the Modern Age

With the 'revival' of Buddhism we enter the tumultuous history of 20th century India. New classes were emerging with new struggles. The country was striving to free itself from the grip of British imperialism and the equally harsh grasp of economic backwardness to confront the challenges of modernity. For many, modernity with its emphasis on rationalism and social justice was against the spirit of traditional religions; it certainly meant moral and intellectual upheavals in the religious world. Yet, contrary to most earlier predictions of sociologists—from Weber and Marx through American and European sociologists in the 1970s—religion had not vanished or even declined; it changed. Thus, the assertion of a new Buddhism in India is not so surprising; nor is it surprising that it would challenge many of the taken-for-granted assumptions of traditional Buddhism.

The history of this new Buddhism is interwoven with the life of one of the most remarkable men of any era, any country—Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), affectionately called 'Babasaheb' by his millions of ex-untouchable followers. A brilliant economist, a lawyer, chairman of the drafting committee of India's Constitution, and for nearly 40 years the unchallenged leader of India's Dalit movement, his place in modern India rivals that of Mahatma Gandhi. Ambedkar in fact confronted Gandhi, primarily over policies to alleviate the exploitation of the ex-untouchables, but also on a larger scale over policies of development for India. In this confrontation, Gandhi stood as the spokesman of a reformed and reinterpreted Hinduism, and Ambedkar emerged as a spokesman for modernity and the heir of the Buddhist tradition. Ambedkar's debates with Gandhi in 1930–32 at the Round

Table conferences and again in 1936 are a historic marker in the challenge to Brahmanism.

Ambedkar confronted not only Gandhi and the reformist and orthodox Hindus but also Indian Marxism. Ambedkar himself was a radical, influenced by Marxism and calling himself for some time a ‘state socialist’. In the tumultuous decade of the 1930s he allied with Communists on issues of workers and peasants’ struggles. Where he broke with the Marxists was over issues of caste and religion. These debates, in the 1940s and 1950s, mark a second historic challenge to a renewed Brahmanism in India.

Ambedkar’s movement towards Buddhism began in 1908, when he first received a book on the Buddha’s life. He followed it with reading on Indian tradition and whatever Buddhist texts he could get access to, with discussions, with visits to the ancient sites of Buddhist caves in Maharashtra. It reached a climax in 1935 when Ambedkar announced, ‘Although I have been born a Hindu, I will not die a Hindu.’ And it culminated in October 1956 in the city of Nagpur in central India when he and 400,000 followers took the ‘three refuges’ of traditional Buddhism and an additional 22 vows. This was a major turning point for Dalits and for the religious–cultural identity of India.

Mahars and Maharashtra

Ambedkar was born a Mahar, a particularly vigorous untouchable community of the state of Maharashtra in western India. He was a gigantic, unique historical figure, one inclined to make us believe that at least to some degree ‘great men’ do have a role in history. Yet it is impossible to imagine his leadership without the background of the specific geographical characteristics and social-historical traditions of Maharashtra.

First, geographically, this area, with its rich black lava soil but hilly and dry for the most part, had few of the ‘river valley’ type wet areas which fostered the most rigid caste hierarchies; only the coastal areas fitted this description. Its peasantry was relatively solidary; the largest single caste, the Kunbi-Marathas, comprised nearly one-third of the total Marathi-speaking population, with hierarchically (but ambiguously) ranked clans instead of subcastes. Colonial rule here gave birth to a thriving textile industry in the

cities of Bombay and Nagpur, which provided employment outlets for peasants, artisans and Dalits. This new working class was mainly from Kunbi-Maratha and related communities, but by the 20th century, Dalits were about 20 per cent of the textile workforce in Bombay and 40 per cent of that in Nagpur.

Among these Dalits, or untouchables, the Mahars were the largest community. 'Where there's a village, there's a Maharwada' (Mahar quarters) was a traditional Marathi saying. Like most large untouchable jatis, the Mahars provided field labour, carried out some 'polluting' tasks such as removing dead cattle (though they were not themselves leather workers) and were low-level village servants, at the beck and call of village leaders and higher level officials. For this they received the harvest from a portion of land known as the 'Mahar watan'. Thus they were not totally landless, and especially in the eastern part of the state, they sometimes had relatively large holdings. There were two 'malguzar' (landlord) Mahar families in the Nagpur area, and many who called themselves 'patils' or headmen. The Mahars also had some ancient traditions as 'sons of the soil', and their traditional duties included deciding disputes about boundaries of farmers' fields. During the British period, they provided army recruits for some time, in the famous 'Mahar battalion', and they made up, as already noted, a good proportion of the textile workers.

The relatively equalitarian situation of the main peasant castes as well as the assertiveness of Dalit communities like the Mahars provided a material base for a relatively democratic social tradition from the 19th century onwards. While Phule's radicalism had been too strong for many of his associates, his Satyashodhak tradition and fierce, polemical writings had left an unforgettable heritage. By the 20th century an expanded non-Brahman movement had emerged, with patronage from the Maharajah of Kolhapur, a descendent of the famous 17th century Maratha ruler Shivaji, who had been alienated by Brahmanical declarations that since his family was 'Shudra' he had no rights to Vedic rituals. With his support the non-Brahman movement grew in strength in the 1920s, posing a challenge to elite nationalism and orthodox tradition, asserting its strength politically in the legislative council. It has both a more conservative wing, exemplified in the many caste associations that developed at the time, and a radical wing, embodied in the revived Satyashodhak Samaj (Omvedt 1976: 98–164).

The Emergence of Ambedkar

It was in this low-caste but vigorous community of Mahars that Babasaheb Ambedkar was born in 1891.[1] His father, who had served in the British army, had minimal education in Marathi and English, and saw to it that his obviously brilliant son was also educated. When the boy passed his matriculation examination in 1908, he received a copy of Krishna Arjunrao Keluskar's Marathi book on the life of the Buddha. Then he was awarded a fellowship from the Maharaja of Baroda, another reformist non-Brahman ruler, to study in the US from 1913 to 1917. Here he completed a Ph.D. in Economics and Politics at the University of Columbia, perhaps the most famous Indian to study at this university. Returning to India, he went first to the state of Baroda to work as a government employee in return for his scholarship—but rejected this after experiences of treatment as an untouchable in the offices and after difficulty in finding a place to live. Instead, he settled in Bombay, teaching in Elphinstone College and, in the 1920s, publishing two major books on economics, one on provincial finances in India, the other on the history of British policies regarding Indian currency.

At a time when all of Indian society was convulsed with economic and political turmoil, political involvement was almost an inevitability for this brilliant and articulate untouchable. In 1920 Ambedkar was introduced to the movement, notably under the sponsorship of Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur. This itself can be said to have been a conscious choice of the young man, and indeed he never ceased to identity himself with the non-Brahman movement and even called himself a 'Satyashodhak', even though he was critical of many of its tendencies. He was even more critical of reformist nationalists, and like almost all Dalit and non-Brahman leaders, he severely attacked 'swadeshi' nationalism. Gradually he began to build a group of activists and supporters, which included both Mahars and caste Hindus, and published a few editions of his first journal, *Mooknayak* in the 1920s.

In 1927 a spectacular first struggle took place. The issue was that of access to water. Untouchables had, of course, traditionally been denied rights to almost any public space, forbidden to use village

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[1] This section draws primarily on the work of Eleanor Zelliot and myself.

roads, visit village temples, live in the main section of the village itself; and to take water from village wells or the supposedly public municipal water reservoirs. Agitation on these issue had already begun, with Phule's act of throwing open his own private well to untouchables in the 19th century serving as a model, and in 1923 one of the non-Brahman members of the state legislature sponsored a bill giving untouchables legal right to such public facilities.

Ambedkar decided to challenge the exclusion from public water in the small town of Mahad in the Konkan, where he had some caste Hindu support. Initially a conference was organised there, and when people arose, nearly spontaneously (though the activists around Ambedkar had discussed the idea), and went down to drink water from the reservoir, near rioting ensued, and caste Hindus acted rapidly to 'purify' the tank. Ambedkar then went back to Bombay, vowing to return, used the incident to spark off an even larger movement and founded a new weekly, *Bahishkrut Bharat*. Gandhi was just making his entry into Indian politics; the new untouchable movement sought to extend 'satyagraha' into the social sphere, and installed Gandhi's photo on their Mahad pavilion. In the end, after an injunction, the untouchables gave up their attempt to take water, but instead signified their rejection of Brahmanic tradition by publicly burning the *Manusmriti*. With this, a struggle for the human physical need of water and a citizen's right of access to public space was transformed into a challenge to Brahmanic tradition. The day was December 26, 1927; and the struggle became celebrated as the 'Untouchable Liberation Day' from that time on.

Buddhism, however, was apparently not seen as an alternative at this time. Ambedkar is reported to have visited ancient Buddhist caves in the Mahad area (Sangarakshata 1986: 5–8). But the debates that began to take place over the rejection of Hinduism in *Bahiskhrut Bharat* at the time focused on Islam and Christianity. A minor storm was raised when a group in Jalgaon vowed that 'a thousand Mahars' would convert to Islam or Christianity if untouchability was not removed by July 1, 1929. Twelve of them eventually did accept Islam. Ambedkar was sympathetic. As he wrote in one of his editorials,

> No particular effect will be felt on the bullying of the so-called upper castes by becoming Buddhist or Arya Samajist, so we see no meaning in following this path. To successfully confront the domination of

> Hindus, we should become Christians or Muslims and win the support of a powerful community and with this erase the mark of Untouchability (*Bahiskrut Bharat*, July 29, 1929, page 6).

Clearly, this image of Buddhism and its being linked to with the Hindu-reformist Arya Samaj, resulted from the fact that the vast majority of upper caste individuals who had turned to Buddhism in the 19th and the 20th century saw it as a kind of reformed Hinduism. The propaganda that the Buddha was only an avatar of Vishnu and that Buddhism was not much different from Vedanta, still dominant in Maharashtra, made it seem less than radical to the militants of the new movement.

Confrontation with Gandhi: 'I will not Die a Hindu'

In 1916 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a lawyer from a Gujarati 'bania' family, returned from South Africa where he had won a reputation for organising Indians to fight apartheid. He quickly distanced himself from both the existing factions within the Indian National Congress, the 'moderates' who advocated constitutional methods and by and large supported social reform, and the 'extremists' who wanted to organise mass movements and who sometimes associated themselves with small terrorist groups. Gandhi's way was different—nonviolent mass action and social reformism that included organising his followers in 'ashrams' to carry on various types of constructive work. He identified himself strongly as a 'Hindu' but interpreted Hinduism in his own way, as fundamentally oriented towards non-violence. Thus he could use concepts such as 'Ram Raj' to denote his ideal society, but never really confront the fact of the armed Ram. He would say with apparent decisiveness, that if untouchability were in the Hindu scriptures he would renounce them, yet would never confront the clear evidence of untouchability in texts of Manu and others.

Yet, in Ambedkar's challenge, Gandhian social reformism was to meet its most bitter foe. During the 1920s, briefly, Ambedkar had apparently seen Gandhi as someone rather different from the orthodox Brahmans of Maharashtra who had mostly controlled the Congress, though may have used his themes for the Mahad satyagraha only for tactical reasons. However, Ambedkar was to

be disillusioned. The crucial events occurred in the 1930–32 period when the British government invited leaders of various Indian political groups to 'Round Table conferences' in London in an effort to get a consensus for gradual devolution of political power (see Omvedt 1994: 167–77).

The Congress boycotted the first conference, but Ambedkar attended as the leading representative of India's untouchables. There he gave eloquent support to the demand for independence:

> We feel that nobody can remove our grievances as well as we can, and we cannot remove them unless we get political power in our own hands. No share of this political power can evidently come to us so long as the British government remains at it is. It is only in a Swaraj constitution that we stand any change of getting the political power in our own hands… .We know that political power is passing from the British into the hands of those who wield such tremendous economic, social and religious sway over our existence. We are willing that it may happen… . (Ambedkar 1982: 505–56).

This however necessitated safeguards, and so Ambedkar made a plea for separate electorates for Dalits, similar to those that were granted to Muslims. Though the majority of Dalit leaders were making this demand, Ambedkar's own first inclination had been to ask for only reserved seats if there were to be universal suffrage. Universal adult suffrage, however, was not on the books, so he asked for separate electorates, fearing that even with reservation, the majority of caste Hindus in a constituency would be able to elect whatever untouchable they wanted.

The first Round Table Conference was followed by the suspension of the Civil Disobedience movement and a pact which led to the appearance of Gandhi at the second conference, with all the prestige of the national movement behind him and a claim to be the sole representative of the Indian people. Between the two conferences, Gandhi and Ambedkar had their first meeting, one which took place in an atmosphere of some tension, with Gandhi treating Ambedkar with insufficient respect and Ambedkar telling Gandhi, 'Mahatmaji, I have no country.' The clash continued at the second conference, as Gandhi claimed himself to represent all Hindus, including Dalits. In fact, it was on specifically Hindu and not nationalist grounds that Gandhi opposed the demands for separate representation:

> The claims advanced on behalf of the Untouchables…is the unkindest cut of all. It means the perpetual bar-sinister….I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast mass of Untouchables…I say that it is not a proper claim by Dr. Ambedkar when he seeks to speak for the whole of the Untouchables of India. It will create a division in Hinduism…I cannot possibly tolerate what is in store for Hinduism if there are two divisions set forth in the villages. Those who speak of the political rights of Untouchables do not know their India, do not know how Indian society is today constructed, and therefore I want to say with all the emphasis I can command that if I was the only person to resist this thing I would resist it with my life (ibid.: 662–63).

And this he did: when the MacDonald Award gave separate electorates to untouchables, Gandhi went on a fast unto death on 20 September, 1932—the first such fast that was in effect against another Indian. With opinion being mobilised all over India and tremendous emotion centered around Gandhi's life, Ambedkar gave in, fearing massive violent retribution against Dalits throughout India. The 'Poona Pact', in which he accepted joint electorates with caste Hindus was signed on September 24. It is an event remembered with bitterness by Dalits even today, because it resulted in a political system in which the election of Dalit representatives has indeed been controlled by caste Hindus.

What followed the fast increased Ambedkar's bitterness. Gandhi had given a moral tone to his fast, defining it as aiming at a 'change of heart' among caste Hindus. He then set up the Harijan Sevak Sangh as a Congress-sponsored organization to work on issues of untouchability. The word 'Harijan' (child of God) was Gandhi's brainstorm of the time, a new identification for the ex-untouchables. Leaders of these resisted the word, both its reference to a 'Hindu' version of God and by asking, 'why us, in particular?' By this time the term 'Dalit' was coming into use, at least in the vernacular, as a translation for the British-bureaucratic term 'Depressed Classes'. The issue of terminology symbolised larger differences over the very purpose and functioning of the movement for dealing with untouchability. Ambedkar wanted an organisation in which Dalits themselves had some control, and whose aim would be the abolition of caste. Gandhi, though, saw the issue as one of the repentence of caste Hindus and the reform of the religion; to him the removal of untouchability was the issue, not the caste system as such. Under

his control caste Hindu domination of the Harijan Sevak Sangh was ensured, and the organisation began activities in which upper-caste Indians undertook cleanliness and educational campaigns in Dalit areas throughout India. Dalits were urged to renounce meat-eating and alcohol, in effect to 'Sanskritise' themselves and so 'become worthy' of equal treatment from the upper castes.

The events of 1932 served to thoroughly disillusion Ambedkar about Gandhi and Gandhian reformism. A final ideological clash came in 1936. Ambedkar by this time had made the startling announcement that though he had been born a Hindu, he did not intend to die a Hindu, an announcement that sent tremors throughout India. In December 1935 he had been invited to the Punjab to deliver a lecture to the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal, an organisation devoted to the abolition of casteism. In March he agreed to deliver the lecture, which was to be in May. However, he sent them a written essay, taking the precaution of printing it himself first. This essay, 'The Annihilation of Caste', was a bold declaration of war on Hinduism; its English first edition of 1500 brought out in April 1936 was sold out and translations into several Indian languages were rapidly made. (The second edition was printed with a reply by Gandhi and a response to that by Ambedkar.) And, so strong was the essay, so controversial the issue—along with Ambedkar's appearance at a Sikh conference around the same time—that the invitation to speak was withdrawn soon after the first edition came out.

Ambedkar's point was simple. In India, the greatest barrier to the advance of the untouchables was Hinduism itself. Property, he said in response to the socialists, was not the only source of power; religion and social status also could, at various stages of society and history, generate power. India needed not an economic revolution, but a social–religious one:

> The political revolution led by Chandragupta was preceded by the religious and social revolution of Buddha. The political revolution led by Shivaji was preceded by the religious and social reform brought about the saints of Maharashtra. The political revolution of the Sikhs was preceded by the religious and social revolution led by Guru Nanak (Ambedkar 1979: 44).

What then was needed? Hinduism itself had to be questioned because it supported *chaturvarna*, the main source of India's social evils:

> You must…destroy the sacredness and divinity with which Caste has become invested. In the last analysis, this means you must destroy the authority of the Shastras and the Vedas….You must take the stand that Buddha took. You must take the stand which Guru Nanak took. You must not only discard the Shastras, you must deny their authority, as did Buddha and Nanak. You must have courage to tell the Hindus that what is wrong with them is their religion – the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of Caste (ibid.: 69).

This was not only an assessment of Hinduism, it was an assessment of Buddhism and Sikhism: at that point he considered these to be the only two indigenous religious traditions which had defied Brahmanism in a thorough-going way. It seems that his thinking was shifting away from conversion to Christianity and Islam to the solutions offered by Indian tradition.

Gandhi's reply came in an article written in his weekly, which he called *Harijan* to symbolise his reformism. As a defence it was simple: untouchability, Gandhi claimed, was not an essential part of the Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis and Puranas. He insisted that reason and spiritual experience were tests for accepting anything as the word of God, but saw nothing essential in the scriptures so defined to object to on the basis of his reason and spirituality. Most significantly, in defending Hinduism, he also defended an idealised version of caste:

> Caste has nothing to do with religion…it is harmful to both spiritual and national growth. Varna and Ashrama are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of Varna teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties…it also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high. All are good, lawful and absolutely equal in status. The callings of a Brahman—spiritual teacher—and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man…. Arrogance of a superior status by and of the Varna over another is a denial of the law. And there is nothing in the law of Varna to warrant a belief in untouchability. (The essence of Hinduism is contained in its enunciation of one and only God as Truth and its bold acceptance of Ahimsa as the law of the human family) (ibid.: 83).

Thus Gandhi reiterated not only his belief in the four varnas but also in *swadharma*, following of the traditional caste duty, whether

as a Brahman or a farmer or a craftsman or scavenger. It was a position he apparently maintained to the end of his life, and for Ambedkar, it was unacceptable.

After 1936, Ambedkar never considered Gandhi a true reformer, but rather a defender of caste-bound Hinduism, a romantic idealising India's villages and seeking simply a continuation of the status quo, dressed up a bit, but without fundamental change. As he said in a 1939 lecture on 'Federation versus Freedom', 'In my mind there is no doubt that the Gandhi age is the dark age of India. It is an age in which people instead of looking for their ideals in the future are returning to antiquity' (ibid.: 352).

Brahmanic Marxism

Apart from Gandhi, another strongly seductive opponent to the fascination for Buddhism emerged in the 1930s. This was Marxism, which was increasingly gathering strength as an ideology among the younger and militant section of the nationalist elite. It offered militancy and a mass force—the organised, factory-based working class—to fight imperialism.

Marxism, as a philosophy, identified an 'essence' of humanity which was as derived from the social relations of production. This was its 'materialism'; and because these relations were seen as inherently contradictory, generating class struggle that would eventually lead to the overthrow of the ruling class and the relations of exploitation that were inherent in the system, it was 'dialectical'. There was little room for individual choice in this system of thinking, and little room for religion or spiritualism. The idea of controlling the passions, the value of compassion, could all be characterised as bourgeois illusions. Religion was simply looked upon as alienation, as a projection of human exploitation onto an imagined world of gods. It was causally irrelevant; not a solution to human exploitation and sorrow nor even a cause of it, but simply a reflection. In Marx's early 'Theses on Feuerbach' he responded to the critique of religion being made by radical Young Hegelians:

> Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world and a real one. His work consists in the dissolution of the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that after completing this work,

> the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular foundation detaches itself from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm is really to be explained only by the self-cleavage and self-contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must itself, therefore, first be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionized in practice. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be criticised in theory and revolutionised in practice.

From this perspective, Marxism was fundamentally uninterested in religion, in the critique of religion or in changes of religion. A change of religion would do no good and even the critique of religion should follow social praxis.

It might be said that marxism's basic difference with Buddhism, at least with classical Buddhism, was not so much in the critique of 'God' as in the view about humans in society. Marx looked at human nature as a collective product, and at human action as exerted collectively. The individual will and individual action had little relevance. In modern sociological terms, 'structure' implied 'agency'; action was determined. The Buddha had also rejected the efficacy of speculation about god or the cosmos. But his attention was directed towards the psychological nature of individual action; and instituting changes in society was not so important as changes in the individual; from that social changes would flow. In that sense, early Buddhism was a radically individualistic doctrine, though it stressed a social ethic and the role of a social organisation, the Sangha, in providing a framework for search.

Marxism did have a potential for incorporating culture, ideology and individual action in a dialectical relationship with social-material relations of production in an overall therapy. However, it was propagated in a collectivist and economist version that proved a handy ideology for the Indian brahmanical elite. It systematically downplayed non-economic factors such as gender and caste, arguing that these would be nearly automatically taken care of with socialist revolution. Young Communists were called upon to 'declass' themselves and they themselves became atheists—but there was no strong pressure, even as much as with early social reformers, to try to make much effective change in the religious ideologies of their families. One religion was as alienating as another; a choice of a different religion was not necessary—what was necessary was an

attack on property relations, on capitalists as the main enemy. The viewing of 'Brahmanism' as a major enemy could be analysed and dismissed as simply another petty-bourgeois illusion.

When the 'class against class' thesis was rejected after 1935, the Communists in India gave their support to the national movement. This they identified with the National Congress, and they fought to bring the working class movement into the Congress Socialist Party which they tried to treat as their 'front' within the Congress (though a split between Communists and Socialists took place fairly quickly). This meant drawing all the activists, including those Dalits and non Brahmans whom they could influence, out of movements led by Ambedkar, Periyar and other social radicals. As the Political Thesis of the 2nd Congress in 1948 put it, the untouchables had to be drawn into the 'democratic front' and this meant an attack on their leadership:

> This task will have to be carried out by a relentless struggle against the bourgeoisie of the upper castes as well as against the opportunist and separatist leaders of the untouchables themselves. We have to expose these leaders, tear away the untouchable masses from their influence, and convince them that their interest lies in joining hands with the other exploited sections… (Communist Party of India 1976: 112).

Ambedkar was specifically named as a 'reformist and separatist leader'. The document described untouchables as forming 'the most exploited and oppressed sections of our people' but made no specific analysis of caste. The same language could have been applied to Blacks, or to any other non-class oppressed section. Brahmanism, and its support by a particular religion, was not at all at issue. Nothing was said about the question of representation in public services and education, which Dalits and non-Brahmans had sought to achieve through reservation. The Left simply ignored reservation, taking it as another 'petty-bourgeois' demand.

Yet it was not a simple question of antagonism between Ambedkar and the Communists and socialists. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement were very much a part of the struggles of the radical 1930s. He and his companions were leading anti-landlord struggles in the Konkan and fights of textile workers in Bombay—in both cases uniting with caste Hindus, in both cases sharing platforms with the Communists. In 1936 when he founded his first political party, he called it the Independent Labour Party, signifying a basic allegiance to the working class movement.

As for Marxism itself, Ambedkar was both attracted and alienated by it. According to his weekly *Janata*, during the 1930s he had announced at a rally that,

> I have definitely read studiously more books on the Communist philosophy than all the Communist leaders here. However beautiful the Communist philosophy is in those books, still it has to be seen how useful it can be made in practice…if work is done from that perspective, I feel that the labour and length of time needed to win success in Russia will not be so much in India. And so, in regard to the toilers' class struggle, I feel the Communist philosophy to be closer to us (*Janata* 15 January 1938).

The power of Marxist economic analysis, the tumult of the rising class movements of the 1930s, the evidence of depression and crisis in capitalist countries, and the apparent developmental achievements of the Soviet Union all exercised a powerful attraction for Ambedkar, as it did for all other movements of the time. This lasted through much of the 1940s, with Ambedkar calling for nationalisation of land and basic industries, and describing himself as a 'state socialist'.

Nevertheless, he had major differences, and these centered around the priority of the economic sector. The general effect of Marxism on social movements of Dalits and non-Brahmans was to pull them away from supposedly 'religious' solutions. This was clearly happening in south India, as Iyothee Thass' 'Sakya Buddhism' died away and the Tamil non-Brahman movement began to centre on political solutions. Ambedkar resisted this trend, and did so with reference to the primary thesis of Marxism, the priority of the 'relations of production'. In a September 27, 1929 editorial in *Bahishkrut Bharat* entitled 'First the Pinnacle, then the Base', he wrote that 'if Lenin had been born in India, he would have first annihilated casteism and untouchability and without that he would not have brought forward the idea of revolution'. This 'base-superstructure' imagery was turned upside down in a major editorial in *Janata:*

> The base is not the building. On the basis of the economic relations a building is erected of religious, social and political institutions. This building has just as much reality as the base. If we want to change the base, then first the building that has been constructed on it has to be knocked down…if we want to change the economic relations of society,

> then first the existing social, political and other institutions will have to be destroyed (*Janata* 25 June 1938).

Ambedkar eventually moved away from the economics of Marxism also, calling himself a 'social democrat' rather than a 'state socialist' at the time of presenting the Indian Constitution. As he developed his understanding of Buddhism, he increasingly stressed it as an all-around alternative to Marxism, capable of solving the problems of conflict and suffering as Marxism could not. In 'The Buddha and Karl Marx', a final essay on the issue, he summed up his assessment by arguing that many of Marx's theses had been disproved, including the economic interpretation of history, the inevitability of revolution, and the pauperisation of the proletariat. The 'residue of fire' that remained, he argued, consisted of concern for 'reconstructing the world', the conflict of interest between classes, and the necessity for the abolition of private property which was a major cause of sorrow or suffering. But, he argued, this could be most effectively done by non-violent means through the Buddhist Sangha, though he did not see it necessary for the state to renounce violence. He quoted the *Cakkavati sutta* to argue that the Buddhist goal was, in essence, a welfare state, with a major aim of providing wealth to the destitute. To him, Buddhism and Marxism were similar in valuing material prosperity as good, but differed regarding the path to equality and social justice; with Buddhism, this happened by changing the minds of men through the Dhamma. And he concluded with a reference to the three basic values of the French revolution, the basic thrust of modernity:

> Society has been aiming to lay a new foundation as was summarized by the French Revolution in three words, fraternity, liberty and equality. The French Revolution...failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasized that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. It seems that these three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha (Ambedkar 1987: 462).

'On the Way' to Buddhism

Though Ambedkar's early impression of Buddhism was marred by the understanding of it as a kind of purified Hinduism or Protestant Hinduism, a view given by the majority of upper-caste

Indians, he remained attracted to it. In 1933, after the second Round Table conference, he wrote in a letter that he was determined to leave Hinduism, would never accept Islam, and was inclined towards Buddhism (Sangharakshata 1986: 60). Around this time also he named his newly-built house 'Rajagriha' after the capital of early Magadha, a center of Gotama's teaching.

He was also attracted by the rationality of Buddhism. In May 1936, a Bombay Presidency Mahar conference was called to discuss actually leaving Hinduism; the resolution urged Mahars to refrain from worshipping Hindu deities, from observing Hindu festivals or going to Hindu places of pilgrimage. The links were to be snapped concretely and decisively. It was at this conference that Ambedkar cited the words of the Buddha, 'Be ye lamps onto yourself, be ye a refuge to yourself. Hold fast to the Truth as a refuge.'

These proclamations of Ambedkar pushed forward a collective process among the Mahars themselves of breaking away from Hinduism and turning towards Buddhism. Its base lay in the new groups of educated youth that was forming within the community, and who were challenging Brahmanic domination, refusing the 'Harijan' identity and aiming at all-around internal and cultural transformation as well. Vasant Moon's autobiography *Vasti*, now translated as *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, gives a compelling picture of this process in one of the large and vibrant Mahar communities of Nagpur. Youth organised to stop participation in Hindu festivals, forcibly breaking the idols of the more traditional members of their community; then when they encountered the Brahman intellectuals of Nagpur who were propagating Buddhism as members of the Mahabodhi Society, they eagerly took it up, started a Buddhist library, and began to read about the Dhamma. When Ambedkar came for a visit, Moon records that as a young student he confronted him with many questions—especially about how the idea of rebirth fitted in with the notion of 'no soul' to be reborn.

Ambedkar's choice, however, was met by the existing Buddhist organisations of India with stark indifference. In contrast to the enthusiasm of many grass-roots Mahars for conversion, Buddhist spokesmen in India responded with dismay to Ambedkar's announcement of conversion. The telegram sent by the secretary of the Mahabodhi Society (in Calcutta) began, 'Shocked very much to read your decision to renounce Hindu religion…Please reconsider

your decision.' Only then did it argue that if there must be conversion, Buddhism would be a good alternative (Sangharakshata 1986: 62). At one level the explanation was simple: the Mahabodhi Society, though founded by the Sinhalese Buddhist leader Anagarika Dharmapala, was dominated in India by Bengali Brahmans. The Sinhalese themselves did not protest against this position.

In one sense the choice of Buddhism may have resonated with Ambedkar's urge to autonomy, seen throughout his social and political career. By the 1940s, in fact, the movement and many Dalit communities had attained a position of some strength in India; for example, they could well hold their own in the 'Mahar–Hindu' riots in Nagpur in the 1940s recorded by Vasant Moon (2001: 93–101, 113–14). Dalits were now not simply victims seeking a refuge, but conscious, awakened human beings concerned about shaping their future and the future of India. A large mass of Dalit Buddhist converts would actually constitute Buddhism in India—whereas if they chose Islam or Christianity, they might gain resources, but they would be lost in the mass of existing members of these religions.

Ambedkar's extensive readings in Indian history and Buddhist texts also played a role in his choice. Essays such as *Who Were the Sudras*? and *The Untouchables*, and the long unpublished manuscript 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India' showed his developing evaluation of Buddhism as the true alternative to the Brahmanical social order. When he published in 1950 a new edition of Laxmi Narasu's *The Essence of Buddhism*, its interpretation of karma in terms of social influence must also have influenced him.

Thus by 1950 he was describing himself as 'on the way' to embracing Buddhism. An article that year in the *Journal of the Mahabodhi Society* entitled 'The Buddha and the Future of His Religion' argued that Buddhism was a religion for the whole world: 'If the new world – which be it realized is very different from the old – must have a religion – and the new world needs a religion far more than the old world did – then it can only be the religion of the Buddha' (quoted by Sangharakshata 1986: 71–72). This was, as he was to make clear in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, because morality was central to Buddhism, in contrast to other religions which made morality secondary to beliefs in God and cosmic principles.

Ambedkar was using the term 'religion' in two ways. When he declared that Buddhism was not a religion, he was referring to the common sense (and dictionary) meaning, which included a belief in

God or divine forces as central. This was also the sense used by many early sociologists, including Marx. In this sense, Buddhism was not a religion; it did not encourage faith; nor awe and trembling before the 'holy'. But in sociology, Emile Durkheim, whose research focused on religion and society, had given a broader definition focusing on the element of the 'sacred' in religion and its role in providing a binding force for social relationships. In this sense, Buddhism was a religion. It was not simply a morality, but a 'sacred morality', and Ambedkar's expounding of this in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* almost echoed Durkheim: 'In every human society, primitive or advanced, there are some things or beliefs which it regards as sacred and the rest as profane… . The sacred is something holy. To transgress it is a sacrilege.' This was necessary, Ambedkar goes on to argue, like Durkheim, because without sacredness no common rules of morality will exist. He then concludes that in a society not bound by a common morality protecting individual rights, exploitation will remain:

> This means there can be liberty for some but not for all. This means that there can be equality for a few but none for the majority. What is the remedy? The only remedy lies in making fraternity universally effective. What is fraternity? It is nothing but another name for brotherhood of men which is another name for morality. This is why the Buddha preached that Dhamma is morality and as Dhamma is sacred so is morality (Ambedkar 1992: 325).

The 'new world', as he noted, needed religion-as-morality just as the tumultuous society of the first millennium BCE had needed it. It was a world in turmoil, one with tremendous potential for economic development, but with increasingly visible poverty and backwardness the world was being rejected by people who could see the wealth and prosperity of others; a world in which massive psychological and spiritual questions were being posed because of the processes of change, by social movements, by wars, by experience of fascism, the Holocaust and unprecedented brutalities. There were promises of economic development but these were to become so enveloped in commercialism and technological 'fixes' that the need for a moral grounding was clear.

In the midst of all these considerations, and in the context of advancing age and ill health, Ambedkar's journey towards Buddhism was completed in October 1956.

The Mass Revival of Buddhism in India

There are two important eyewitness descriptions of the Buddhist conversion which took place on a large field in Nagpur that was henceforth to be known as the *diksha bhoomi*, the field of vow-taking. One is by Sangharakshata, the English Buddhist monk, founder of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, who was to play an important role in spreading and confirming Buddhism in the period immediately following conversion. The other is by Vasant Moon, a Dalit government officer from Nagpur, later to become the editor of Ambedkar's English writings for the Government of Maharashtra, and who at that time was an activist of the Samta Sainik Dal.

Let us begin with Sangharakshata's account. In his earlier meetings with Ambedkar he had become aware of the man's ill-health, and dislike for the Mahabodhi society, which at that time was dominated by Brahmans. For the *diksha* ceremony itself, as he described it, people

> even the poorest, came clad in the spotless white shirts and saris that had been prescribed for the occasion by their beloved leader. Some families had had to sell trinkets in order to buy their new clothes and meet the expenses of the journey, but they had made the sacrifice gladly and set out for Nagpur with songs on their lips and the hope of a new life in their heart....Some stayed with relations in the Mahar ghettoes...Many simply camped on any patch of waste ground they could find...By the end of the week 400,000 men, women and children had poured into Nagpur, with the result that the population had nearly doubled and the white-clad Untouchables had virtually taken over the city. The Caste Hindus...gazed with astonishment at the spectacle of tens of thousands of clean, decently dressed, well behaved and well-organised people in whom they had difficulty in recognizing their former slaves and serfs.... (Sangharakshata 1986: 129–30).

When Ambedkar proclaimed his 'refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha' and took the vows from U. Chandramani, a Burmese who was the oldest Bhikku in India, some of those who were afraid because of his reluctance about taking refuge in the Sangha gave a sigh of relief. Then, he turned around and himself administered the vows to the masses there—and added an additional 22 vows:

(1) I will not regard Brahma, Vishnu or Mahadev as gods and I will not worship them.
(2) I will not regard Ram or Krishna as gods and I will not worship them.
(3) I will not honour Gauri, Ganpati or any god of Hinduism and I will not worship them.
(4) I do not believe that god has taken any avatar.
(5) I agree that the propaganda that the Buddha was the avatar of Vishnu is false and mischievous.
(6) I will not do the ceremony of *shraddhapaksh* (for the departed) or *pindadan* (gifts in honour of the deceased).
(7) I will do no action that is inconsistent with the Dhamma of Buddhism.
(8) I will have no rituals done by Brahmans.
(9) I regard all human beings as equal.
(10) I will strive for the establishment of equality.
(11) I will depend on the Eightfold Path declared by the Buddha.
(12) I will follow the 10 vows declared by the Buddha.
(13) I will have compassion for all creatures and will care for them.
(14) I will not steal.
(15) I will not lie.
(16) I will not follow any addiction.
(17) I will not drink alcohol.
(18) I will carry on my life based on the three principles in the Buddhist Dhamma of *dhyana*, *shila* and *karuna*.
(19) I renounce the Hindu religion which has obstructed the evolution of my former humanity and considered humans unequal and inferior.
(20) I have understood that this is the true Dhamma.
(21) I consider that I have taken a new birth.
(22) From this time forward I vow that I will behave according to the Buddha's teachings.

These were clearly designed both to explicate the teachings of the Dhamma in simple form and to stress the distinctions from earlier Brahmanic Hinduism. Ambedkar was acting, in this unique ceremony, not simply to adopt Buddhism but also to give it a new shape.

Moon gives us a 'picture from below' of the conversion and its aftermath. Nagpur, the city of his birth, had many vibrant Mahar communities and had already begun a journey of 'cultural transformation'—challenging the performance of Hindu festivals, beginning the spread of Buddhism. Its youth were militantly organised, in the uniformed and disciplined Samta Sainik Dal (League of Soldiers for Equality), and they fought pitched battles at times with anti-Dalit caste Hindus. It was the Samta Sainik Dal leader Vasant Godbole who pleaded fervently for Nagpur as the site for the mass conversion. Nagpur, he argued, was historically a city with Buddhist connections (the Mahars often described themselves as descendents of 'Nagas'), and its people there were well-prepared for the difficulties of organising such a mass event. At the last meeting with Ambedkar, Godbole reported that he had to assure Ambedkar that the ground had been 'sanctified' only by Dalit Buddhist monks, and not by the then Brahman leader of the Mahabodhi society in Nagpur (Moon 2001: 149–51).

In the conversion ceremony itself, Moon worked with the Samta Sainik Dal to clear the grounds and to ensure Babasaheb's security. The fear for attacks on his life due to the hatred of orthodox Hindus had an ironic point when an old woman with a basket who wanted to come forward was examined—and declared innocent. Moon himself ran frantically at the last minute to find an appropriate chair for Babasaheb to sit on. As an activist, he was so heavily involved with these technical issues that he gives little description of the mass emotionalism of the affair.

Moon's own emotion was expressed just a few weeks later, when he describes the train arrival and procession in Nagpur following Ambedkar's death:

> Thousands of people had thronged to see the urn [with Babasaheb's ashes] at Nagpur, and when we emerged from the train, carrying it with us, a wild shout of lamentation came from this mass of people....While viewing the funeral pyre in Mumbai I had maintained a calm and cool manner, keeping the words of the Buddha fixed in my mind: 'This body will be destroyed; death is inevitable.' However, hearing the cry from the masses in Nagpur, my heart trembled. Without my becoming aware of it, tears began to fall from my eyes, and I began to cry along with everyone else.

> In the evening, a huge procession left from the Indora area...Everyone held candles. In ranks of four and as disciplined as soldiers, thousands of people walked one after another. Small children, women and men, old people, everyone went along in that procession without shouting slogans and with peaceful minds. Only one day before the people in the procession might have felt a little fear while going past settlements of Hindus, but the day they moved ahead fearlessly, as if with a torch in their hands and with the solemn chant of *Buddham saranam gacchami*. The Nagpurites were trying to extinguish the fire of sorrow (Moon 2001: 161–62).

Buddhist Renaissance

So began the Buddhist renaissance in India. It was only a beginning; Ambedkar's mass conversion brought together millions of dalits, mainly from Maharashtra and parts of north India. It made little impact on the majority of Indian Dalits, however, who continued for a long time to identify themselves as 'Hindus'. And it did not touch the masses of non-Dalit caste Hindus. As Buddhist activists have noted, the small wave of high-caste conversions even dried up as Buddhism now became identified as an 'Untouchable religion'.

The Mahars and other Dalits, though self-confident, and with remarkable individuals emerging from them, were overwhelmingly poor and with limited resources. Institution building was slow. The assertion of Buddhism at the level of scholarship and art was slow. For a long time, Buddhism was hardly taken seriously. The independent Indian state adopted some of its symbols, for instance the Asokan pillar and chakra, but continued to see these as part of an India that was essentially Hindu, essentially derived from a Sanskritic, Vedic culture.

But the assertion of Dalits and other 'low'-caste groups has taken on renewed force, beginning with the rise of the Dalit Panthers and similar groups throughout the country in the 1970s, and continuing unevenly but unabatedly into the 1990s. 'Bahujans' (or OBCs) and 'Adivasis' are making their mark and looking to alliance with minority religious groups. In many ways the revival of 'Hindu nationalism' or Hindutva in the 1980s and its coming to political power in the 1990s has sparked a new sense of urgency about cultural and religious struggles. Today the interest in Buddhism

among radical activists from Dalit-Bahujan backgrounds is greater than ever. Debates are going on; books are published; songs are written; meditation courses are organised. Mass vows of rejection of Hinduism and mass acceptance of Buddhism are beginning to be held. Dalits are making their mark not only nationally but on the world arena, for example with the Durban conference. Perhaps we are standing on the threshhold of a new age of 'Buddhist India'.

9

Conclusion

With the *dhammadiksha* of 1956, a new era of Buddhism in India began, as masses of Dalits in Maharashtra and north India affirmed a new commitment. Yet for decades this remained stagnant, limited to Dalits, and restricted as a social force because of their poverty, lack of education and material backwardness. Even their population of some millions in the context of India's near-billion population seemed insignificant.

From the 1970s, however, a new anti-caste movement began which soon gathered force and became a mass movement by the 1980s and brought the campaign against Brahmanism on to a wider Indian stage. This, in turn, eventually led to a renewed interest in Buddhism among wider sections of Indians—primarily Dalits throughout India, but also including the other backward classes (OBCs), or non-Brahmans, in many areas and many upper caste intellectuals. By the beginning of the new millennium, when Dalits took their campaign against casteism to a world arena and tried to focus world attention at the World Conference against Racism held in August–September 2001 at Durban, an international interest in Ambedkar himself could be seen. New mass conversions have begun; though numbers are as yet small, there is a seriousness which has frightened the Hindutva forces and led to overreactions. At the world level, in the currently growing wave of interest in Buddhism, involving new seekers from North America and Europe and new examinations of their own tradition by Asian Buddhists, Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism is also beginning to play an important role.

This requires a critical look at the main points raised by Ambedkar. This chapter will conclude the study of Buddhism, Brahmanism and caste in India with a look at some issues raised earlier: the meaning of Nirvana; the issue of whether Buddhism makes sense without the karma and rebirth framework; the question

of Buddhism's relationship to idealism, materialism and science; the social thrust of Buddhism; and finally whether it does indeed make sense to see Indian history as 'nothing but a history of mortal conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism.'

Nirvana: The Meaning of Freedom

There is perhaps no word so misunderstood and debated as the term nibbana (popularly known in its Sanskrit form Nirvana). This can be seen by looking at two simple dictionary definitions:

> **nir.va.na** n, often cap [Skt *nirvana*, lit., act of extinguishing, fr. *nis*- out + *vati* it blows…] 1: the final beatitude that transcends suffering, karma, and samsara and is sought esp. in Buddhism through the extinction of desire and individual consciousness (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*).
>
> **nirvaan**: m. Calamity. Death. Salvation (*Marathi–English Dictionary by Madhav Deshpande*).

Three definitions from Molesworth, the best Marathi–English dictionary still available give an even better idea of complexities and distortions:

> **nirbaan**: a (S) that has quitted or is without house, family and worldly concerns
>
> **nirvaan**: n (S) Extremity or extreme distress, the state of one reduced to his last resource. 2. Fig Death. 3. The ultimatum of man – emancipation from matter and reunion with the Deity
>
> **nirvaan**: a (S) Departed, utterly gone, lit.fig.; e.g. defunct or dead; emancipated from matter or from distinct existence; extinguished or gone out.[1]

A look in almost any dictionary will reveal a similar disparity of meanings. Ambedkar's Pali dictionary, it might be noted, gives 'extinction, destruction, annihilation' for *nibbaana,* and 'free from desire or human passion' for the closely correlated *nibbano*'

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[1] An amusing feature of the collaboration in producing this dictionary between Molesworth, an English puritanical aristocrat and Brahman pandits can be seen by looking up *zhavane* (to fuck) which is defined as 'to hold in sexual embrace, vc (Low)'. While today's Oxford English–Marathi dictionary gives the correct translation, all current Marathi–English dictionaries avoid the term. Its use was a defiant distinguishing feature of much early Dalit poetry.

(1998: 223)! ‘Extinction of desire’ is close to the original meaning but ‘extinction of individual consciousness’ is not; nor are ‘death’ and ‘calamity’. All this indicates a linguist history in which the original Buddhist (Pali) meaning has been overlaid not so much by developments within Buddhism itself as by reinterpretations deriving from Brahman hostility to the whole doctrine.

In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar gave a succinct definition, significantly in a section entitled ‘Living in Nibbana’:

> There are three ideas which underlie his conception of Nibbana. Of these the happiness of a sentient being as distinction from the salvation of the soul is one. The second idea is the happiness of the sentient being in Samsara while he is alive.... The third idea which underlies his conception of Nibbana is the exercise of control over the flames of the passions which are always on fire (Ambedkar 1992: 234).

Contemporary Pali and Buddhist scholarship seems to broadly agree with this. First, what was meant by the final goal of Buddhist effort cannot mean ‘extinction’ simply because not only the Buddha, but so many others following him (and in legend, before him) have been described as attaining it in their lifetimes. (For this reason the word *mahaparinibbana* came to be used for the death of the Buddha). The liberated person is not out of his consciousness, or perceptions, or even feelings of pain and happiness—but is not attached to these through craving.

This is expressed very frequently in early Pali literature. An important text here is the *Atthakavagga* of the *Sutta Nipata*, which is considered to be one of the oldest texts of Buddhism. It records what are probably the Buddha’s earliest teachings in a period before the establishment of the Sangha when bhikkus were largely solitary wanderers. The term ‘*nibbaana*’ itself appears only once, but the major terms of the karma and rebirth frame (e.g. *jatimaran*) do not; instead the term *bhava* and correlates is often taken to refer to ‘future lives’, though this interpretation of the word can be contested. The terms ‘Buddha’ and ‘Tathagata’ hardly appear; instead the words used for the person who has achieved the goal include *muni* (sage) ‘bhikku’, ‘Brahman’ and ‘*sant*’ (from the Pali correlate of *shant*, one who has achieved peace, the calmed one). All of these clearly refer to a person who has stilled his passions, not to one who gives up all relation to the world, all perceptions, all consciousness.

> *Greed, I say, is a great flood; it is a whirlpool sucking one down, a constant yearning, seeking a hold, continually in movement; difficult*

to cross is the morass of sensual desire. A sage does not deviate from truth, a brahmana stands on firm ground; renouncing all, he is truly called 'calmed'.

Having actually experienced and understood the Dhamma he has realized the highest knowledge and is independent. He comports himself correctly in the world and does not envy anyone here. He who has left behind sensual pleasures, an attachment difficult to leave behind, does not grieve nor have any longing; has cut across the stream and is unfettered. Dry out that which is past, let there be nothing for you in the future. If you do not grasp at anything in the present you will go about at peace. One who, in regard to this entire mind–body complex, has no cherishing of it as 'mine', and who does not grieve for what is nonexistent truly suffers no loss in the world. For him there is no thought of anything as 'this is mine' or 'this is another's; not finding any state of ownership, and realizing 'nothing is mine', he does not grieve.

To be not callous, not greedy, at rest and unruffled by circumstances – that is the profitable result I proclaim about one who does not waver. For one who does not crave, who has understanding, there is no production (of new kamma). Refraining from initiating (new kamma) he sees safety and prosperity everywhere. A sage does not speak in terms of being equal, lower or higher. Calmed and without selfishness, he neither grasps nor rejects' (*Sutta Nipata* 945–54).

Thus modern translations either just write 'nibbana' or use such words as 'unbinding' or 'freedom'.

The Question of the Karma/Rebirth Frame

There is another word that has a great history of ambiguity within the Buddhist tradition, and that is the word *kamma/karma*. On the one hand, it means simply 'action' and was very often used by the Buddha to contrast with 'birth' as a criteria for identifying a person. On the other hand, it was identified by the time of Buddha himself, and afterwards in the mainstream of historical Buddhism, from Theravada on through Mahayana, Vajrayana and almost all schools, with the cosmological–ideological framework of rebirth. The 'law of karma' then is thought to indicate a chain of causal relations in which the failure to extinguish passion and achieve *nibbana* in one lifetime leads to an inevitable uprising of another human individual in another birth.

Ambedkar has decisively rejected this notion, and as we have already seen scholars like Grace Burford have also attacked it very strongly. Burford centers her argument on a logical contradiction

between the themes of achieving control of passion focused on in the *Atthakavagga* and those of classical Theravada Buddhism which see *nibbana* as a transcendental state and so can establish no linkage between actions in the world and achieving it. She argues that the value which is taught in the *Atthakavagga* is one of an ethical life of freedom from desire, and that this can be achieved in incremental steps in life here-and-now through ethical practice; the Buddha himself provided an example of the ideal, living as such until the time of his achieving enlightenment until his death at the age of 80. This ideal, in other worlds, is immanent and life-affirming; it does necessarily even require a monastic life (though that most facilitates the achievement); and it implies no process of going through rounds of births and deaths governed by the laws of *kamma* (Burford 1991: 7–11, 183–95).

Burford contrasts these basic themes of the *Atthakavagga* with those of its commentators, who impose on it the theoretical framework of classical Theravada Buddhism. This framework, as we have seen, assumes the difference between *samsara* (the world of births and deaths, governed by the laws of kamma) and *nibbana,* the transcendental state of freedom. This leads to a contradictory situation, because the ethical behaviour that produces 'good' kamma leading to a 'good rebirth' is not necessarily connected with the enlightenment necessary for *nibbana*. It also leads to a dualistic situation because there are two goals, one identified with the monks (achievement of nibbana) and one with laymen (ethical action in the world which at best can lead to a 'good' rebirth). There is no necessary connection between the two; in fact the kind of behaviour/psychological action required for the achievement of enlightenment is almost absolutely transcendent, removed from even the 'good' action that produces 'good' *kamma*. A contradiction thus results from both the karma/rebirth framework and the characterisation of the entire round of births-and-deaths as overwhelmed by sorrow.[2]

Burford's position has been criticised, for instance with the argument that insistence on a logically consistent single value orientation is itself not consistent with Buddhist pluralism (Boyd 1991: 882). Clearly, not all among those scholars who stress the interpretation of

[2] This, it should be noted, identifies a contradiction that is different from that pointed to by Ambedkar and others, i.e., the contradiction between the framework of karma/rebirth and the principle of *anatta*; much of Theravada Buddhist theorising has been devoted to resolving this particular contradiction.

nibbana as referring to the psychological achievement of permanent freedom from passion within the world would agree with her position. For instance, David Kalupahana, whose important studies have done much to make Buddhist psychological and philosophical positions clear, has argued that rebirth was one concept that the Buddha accepted because of his insights (Kalupahana 1994: 41–42).

Debates, however, are beside the point. All that is necessary to legitimise the approach of Navayana Buddhism within the world of Buddhism is to show that a Buddhism without the karma/rebirth frame is possible and legitimate. What scholars like Burford argue on a theoretical plane, Ambedkar's followers are putting forward in the social arena. There is then no way that any true Buddhist of any school can deny that this is a form of Buddhism.

A social-historical point can be made here. The karma/rebirth theme was a crucial part of the emerging tumultuous world of the first millennium. It was not only taken for granted by a large proportion of the philosophies, sects and religions of the time; but to many it also seemed necessary to provide a ground for ethical action. It was the belief in the punishments-and-rewards that awaited the self after death that seemed to urge many into some kind of moral action. In Semitic religions, the ground of morality was provided by the notion of a supreme God who would sit in judgment upon the soul. In Brahmanic Hinduism and Buddhism it was the karma/rebirth frame that seemed to do the same. Many of those who want to argue for (one might say, 'cling to') the notion of rebirth as being a part of Buddhism do so because of their concern for establishing a groundwork for social morality (Kalupahana, for instance, implies this is true of the Buddha himself)! It is an argument that has to be taken seriously. Whether in the conditions of the 21st century such a grounding is necessary or not is another question—one, we might say, that history will decide.

Idealism, Materialism and Beyond

Greater problems with Navayana Buddhism may be because of an idealistic tendency with Ambedkar himself.[3] For instance, he seems

[3] This is only a tendency; Ambedkar generally is quite conscious of economic and political factors. It can be noted that he qualifies his statement about the 'mortal conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism' by saying this is true of India—i.e. not generally, as the statement 'all history is a history of class struggle.'

to identify the Buddha's teaching with idealism when he writes in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* that among 'What He Accepted' of dominant Indian philosophical themes was

> recognition of the mind as the centre of everything. Mind precedes things, dominates them, creates them. If mind is comprehended all things are comprehended. Mind is the leader of all its faculties. Mind is the chief of all its faculties. The very mind is made up of those faculties. The first thing to attend to is the culture of the mind (Ambedkar 1992: 104).

In contrast, a recent study by Kancha Ilaiah has emphasised the this-worldly and rationalistic nature of the Buddha's political philosophy. Taking a statement ascribed to the Buddha to the effect that people will come to an end with death, Ilaiah calls the Buddha 'a materialist of the ancient period' but not 'in a strict Marxist sense':

> It is not possible to compare Buddha with Marx in entirety because the conditions in which they lived were different, hence one reflected an under-developed agrarian economy and the other an advanced capitalist one. But what is common to them both is the materialist world outlook (Ilaiah 2001: 129).

Ilaiah is correct, but 'materialism' is an inadequate term to describe the Buddha's teachings. Most versions of materialism, certainly its Indian forms, assume some kind of underlying substance which has basic characteristics (*swabhava* in traditional Indian Samkhya phraseology) from which the historical world/universe has evolved. This position was clearly refuted by the Buddha, as we have seen in the discussion of his rejection of a 'root cause' or 'root sequence' (or any form of 'ground of being') in the *Mulapariyaya Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya*. Even Marxist forms of 'historical materialism' or 'dialectical materialism' would fall under his critique: they define the ultimate 'root cause' in more 'social' terms (as the forces and relations of production) but nevertheless argue that there is such an ultimate cause. Buddhist philosophy rejects this assumption itself.

For Ilaiah also, the 'materialism' of the Buddha is exemplified in the *pattica samuppada*, or 'dependent arising'. Ilaiah sees this as exemplified in the account of the origins of the state in the *Aganna Suttanta* (described in Chapter 2) where a process of causal relationship is described in which humans evolve, (becoming more and

more 'material' in the process), becoming dependent on food, then on private property, and then from this arises theft, punishment and the state. What is given here is not a deterministic evolution from some 'first cause' but rather a process of development and change, with one thing proceeding after another.

The focus on this kind of causality, as central to Buddhism, might be seen in a text often called the 'formula of the Dhamma', and that is found engraved on stupas and clay tablets all over India, from Taxila and Kushinagar in the north to Ajanta and Kanheri (Dutt 1988: 224–25n).

> *Then the venerable Assaji pronounced to the paribbajaka Sariputta the following text of the Dhamma:* ***'Of all phenomena that proceed from a cause, the Tathagata has told the cause; and He has explained their cessation also; this is the doctrine of the great Samana.'*** *And the paribbajaka Sariputta after having heard this text obtained the pure and spotless Eye of the Truth: 'Whatsoever is subject to the condition of origination is subject also to the condition of cessation.' (And he said), 'If this alone be the Dhamma, now you have reached up to the state where all sorrow ceases [i.e. nibbana] which has remained unseen through many eons of the past* (Vinaya I, 25, 5–6 the highlighted portion is the 'formula').

Does this indicate a scientific method? One might argue that it both does and doesn't: the passage in question, for example, emphasises causality, but links this emphasis to an apparent (very unscientific) reference to the omniscience of the Buddha. Indeed, what the Buddha taught was not directed to the understanding of the empirical social world or the physical universe—an effort which he rejected as useless—but to a psychological subjective understanding. In this sense, Buddhism might be called, not unscientific but pre-scientific.

It also might be noted that within the Buddhist tradition the earlier versions, and what may be the earliest version of all, of the *paticca samuppada* chain leading to sorrows are less idealistic, and the most 'materialistic'. This again comes in the *Atthakavagga,* where the origin of 'contentions and disputes, lamentations and sorrows, selfishness and conceit, arrogance along with slander' is asked. The reply is to point to *piya* (being too endeared to objects and persons); this in turn arises from *chanda* (desires), these from thinking of things as *satam/asatan* (thinking of things as pleasant

or unpleasant); this from *phassa* (sense-impression or contact); this from *nama-rupa* (the mental and the material) (*Sutta Nipata*, #862–71). The sutta then goes on to say that 'Grasping has its source in wanting (something)....By the disappearance of material objects sense-impression is not experienced' (*Sutta Nipata*, #872).

Then it is said that 'materiality' and 'pleasure and discomfort' cease to be real for a person when

> *His perception [sanna] is not the ordinary kind, nor is his perception abnormal; he is not without perception nor is his perception (of materiality) suspended—to such a one materiality ceases. Perception is indeed the source of the world of multiplicity (Sutta Nipata #875; translation by John Ireland).*

John Gombrich translates a very similar passage from the *Atthakavagga* as follows:

> *There are no ties for one who is dispassionate towards his perceptions. There are no delusions for one who is released by insight. Those who have taken hold of perceptions and views go around in the world clashing* (*Sutta Nipata* #847; in Gombrich 1997: 119).

This appears almost contradictory, it suggests that the teacher here is groping to express what was difficult in the language available to him. The difficulty apparently remained even when words evolved specifically to express this, for these words themselves became distorted and corrupted. But still the point seems clear: there is a strong conditioning link between the 'material' (external) world and subjective perceptions which are part of the whole psychological binding that prevents a person from a free and joyous existence. Still these links can be broken; that is, achieving freedom from passion is an empirical, psychological state (not a transcendental one) and the possibility of achieving it implies sufficient freedom of action to break through conditioning.

Ideologies and Science

Buddhist teachings do not deal with the nature of the social and physical world, and to this degree can be called pre-scientific, or a-scientific. In the theory of knowledge they do, however, come very close to what today would be called a scientific outlook. The clearest

exposition of this has been given by Kalupahana, who stresses that in terms of knowledge and understanding, the Buddha's teaching found a middle way between the extremes of absolutism and skepticism (Kalupahana 1994: 30–59). There is no absolute; at the same time, relative knowledge can be achieved, sufficient at least to free a person from psychological bondage in the world.

Anti-absolutism is expressed in a major theme of the *Athakkavagga*, an extended critique of *ditthi*—which generally means 'views' but which might best be translated as 'ideology'. The Buddha found in the tumultuous period of his search for freedom and understanding that a wide variety of views were being put forward, all of them apparently being clung to passionately and fiercely. He began to see that the very clinging to these, the need to have certainty of knowledge—knowledge of any kind, even knowledge about liberation—was itself a form of bondage. Again, as the *Atthakavagga* puts it, in John Ireland's translation,

> *A person who associates himself with certain views, considering them as best and making them supreme in the world, he says, because of that, that all other views are inferior; therefore he is not free from contention (with others). In what is seen, heard, cognized and in ritual observances performed, he sees a profit for himself. Just by laying hold of that view he regards every other view as worthless. Those skilled (in judgement) say that (a view) becomes a bond if, relying on it, one imagines everything else as inferior....In whom there is no inclination to either extreme, for becoming or non-becoming, here or in another existence, for him there does not exist a fixed viewpoint on investigating the doctrines assumed (by others). Concerning the seen, the heard and the cognized he does not form the least notion. That brahmana who does not grasp at a view, with what would he be identified in the world?'* (*Sutta Nipata* 796–98, 801–02).

The opposition to *ditthi* is not an opposition to forming opinions or having 'viewpoints' — it cannot be, after all, since the first point on the 'eightfold path' to the cessation of sorrow (the fourth 'noble truth') is *sammaditthi*, or 'right views'. Rather it is a warning against clinging to views, grasping at them, being attached to them, seizing on them: in other words, it is an injunction against taking any framework in an absolutist fashion.

Over 2000 years later, Jotirao Phule made a similar point. In an era that was also one of transition and tumult, both socio-economic and ideological, he wrote,

> All ideologies have decayed.
> No one views comprehensively.
> What is trivial, what is great
> cannot be understood.
> Philosophies fill the market,
> gods have become a cacophony,
> to the enticements of desire
> people fall prey…
> There is a cacophony of opinions,
> no one heeds another.
> Each thinks the opinion
> he has caught is great.
> Pride in untruth
> leads them to destruction.
> So the wise people say,
> seek the truth (Phule 1991: 440).

Scientific method, we might argue, is based on an epistemology of critical realism: verifiable knowledge of the world is possible but it is always relative since further developments in science—in understanding, in the ability to experiment and measure—can cast into doubt previous theories and paradigms. Hence they always remain theories, always paradigms, never absolute certainties. When a theory or viewpoint is seized or clung to, when it is held to be an absolute truth, when it is taken to be more than the tentative approach to reality that it is, then it no longer remains a scientific hypothesis or theory but has become an ideology. It obstructs further learning.

This expression of this 'middle way' between skepticism and absolutism had crucial relevance to developments in Indian scientific thinking. In a lecture on science and history in India, India's Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has stressed the connection between scientific development, an open mind and skepticism, and 'heterodoxy'. Thus he argues that the origin of the mathematical and scientific developments (for instance, in astronomy) that are linked to the Gupta period in India lie primarily in 'the tradition of scepticism that can be found in pre-Gupta India—going back to at least the sixth century BC—particularly in matters of religion and epistemic orthodoxy' ('History and the Enterprise of Knowledge', *The Hindu*, January 4, 2001). Buddhism, with its opposition to clinging to *ditthi* and insistence on achieving knowledge by oneself in

contrast to reliance on authority, was the main force behind this tradition of skepticism.

'Reconstructing the World': *Sukhavati* Now

In reformulating traditional Buddhist thinking, Ambedkar had initially objected to the predominance of *dukkha* and then given it an extremely social interpretation, identifying it with social-economic exploitation. With this, the goal of action becomes not only the liberation of the individual seeker, but the transformation of the world. This is expressed most radically in Ambedkar's account of the way his first audience of five samanas greet the Buddha's first teaching: 'never in the history of the world has salvation been conceived as the blessing of happiness to be attained by man in this life and on this earth by righteousness born out of his own efforts!' (Ambedkar 1992: 130–31).

The concept of the Dhamma as the basis for 'reconstruction of the world' moves the focus away from the individual to the social. Buddhism on the whole has been an individualistic religion. Though it has clearly propagated an ethics for the social world of householders and producers—which we saw in Chapter 3—its more classic forms have not sought to order society in the way that traditions such as Islam, Judaism, Confucianism, Brahmanism and so forth have done. This can be looked at, from one point of view, as an advantage—because the 'ordering of society' by such religions has often involved maintenance of social hierarchies and, even if they have been relatively equalitarian in 'class' terms, almost always gave rise to gender discrimination.

At the same time, it can be called a limitation. In part, the rise of Mahayana Buddhism can be seen as a reaction to the individualistic focus of Theravada, which saw the role of the householder almost entirely in terms of providing support for the religious aspirations of the bhikkus. Mahayana proponents, in justifying the doctrine of Bodhisattvas, argued that 'Hinayana' was too narrow and selfish in taking the Buddha as only a teacher, in seeing the achievement of liberation as only possible for a relatively few enlightened beings. Instead of posing each individual as going through tiring and almost endless rounds of rebirth, labouring for his/her own enlightenment, it proposed to shorten this path through the figure of the

Bodhisattva, whose compassion for all is designed to help the whole world achieve liberation.

In one sense Mahayana 'socialised' the striving of the individual to overcome karmic determination by allowing for the transfer of merit. But it was still done within the framework of escaping from the rounds of rebirth in which the sorrowful nature of the world of contingency (*samsara*) was left unchanged. The extreme example of this is 'Pure Land' Buddhism in which Amitabha Buddha has achieved the power to give every believer rebirth in a Pure Land of delight and glory (*sukhavati*, for which a better translation would be 'Joyous Land') from which he/she will then attain enlightenment. While this clearly shortens the way to liberation and postulates the end of most sorrow and suffering even before final liberation still, for those who reside in the Joyous Land, the Joyous Land itself is beyond all the universe, beyond time, beyond the heavens, unconnected with life here and now.

It might be argued, though, that there is also something of a contradiction in the ethical teachings of early Buddhism and the idea that the world is only a realm of sorrow which has to be escaped from. So much of Buddhist ethics is in fact aimed at, or seems to be aimed in such a way that it would have the result of lessening sorrow and exploitation. The kind of self-controlled, compassionate, righteous behaviour adjoined in the Dhamma should, in fact, have the result of transforming the world, at least to some extent. The notion of a 'Joyous Land' from which enlightenment would be easy implies that in the absence of very empirical forms of exploitation and suffering, an individual can more easily achieve true freedom at a psychological level. In this case, whether any elements of the 'Joyous Land' can be achieved here and now is a question of the actual nature of empirical social life.

During the pre-capitalist era, in an age of undeveloped science and rational understanding of natural processes, it was perhaps natural: to assume that there was no 'rational' way to order the social world. In the 19th and 20th century, when the ideal of a 'classless society' was linked to a scientific understanding of historical economic laws, and even said to be an inevitable result of the functioning of these, 'Sukhavati now' began to seem a possibility to human beings. Ideals of the French Revolution merged into those of liberalism and socialism. In spite of all the tragedies of 20th century history, which have often seemed to mock such human hopes, it can still be argued that actual social betterment is a part

of the Buddhist path. This is what some of the new forms of 'engaged Buddhism' seem to be doing.[4]

At the same time, the Buddhist caution against *ditthi* militates against a simple addition of Marxist or other enlightenment faith to a Buddhist framework. Ambedkar's own evolution, from conventional liberal economics through Marxism to an effort to express a Buddhist perspective on a welfare state, reminds us of that. Marx can teach us much about capitalism—and the Marxist vision of going beyond it to an empirically achievable classless and casteless non-patriarchal society still has its relevance. But the capitalist society of today, and possibilities of going beyond it, has to be analysed on its own, without the attachment to 'isms' (*ditthi*) that so frequently have proved a barrier rather than a help to understanding.

Buddhism and Brahmanism in Indian History

What, then, of Ambedkar's formulation that the conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism was a decisive one in the social history of India?

As a general principle of a socio-historical analysis of Indian society, it may be said to be necessary but insufficient. Much of this history did indeed include such a confrontation as a part of its development. Yet it is necessary again to guard against overstatement. To say that 'Buddhism' and 'Brahmanism' as frameworks or ideologies or philosophies were a factor in history, in the sense that they were not simply 'reflections' of a socio-economic base but played an autonomous role, is one thing. To say they can serve as a sole or even major determining explanation is another. In the first sense Ambedkar's formulation was correct, in the second sense it is inadequate.

Looking at any historical period or phase solely in terms of contending ideological/philosophical views will not tell us very much about the changes in these philosophies over time. Neither

[4] Perhaps a parallel could be suggested in African American gospel/freedom music, where we can trace the transition from seeing the 'land of freedom' sought in heaven to escaping from slavery to the 'free land' of Canada. Odetta's 'Freedom Trilogy'—'I'll go home to my Lord and be free'/'Come go with me to that land…'/'I'm on my way, and I won't turn back'—shows this clearly.

'Buddhism' nor 'Brahmanism' can be taken as eternal, unchanging entities: the transformation of both needs to be analysed not only in terms of their conflict with each other, but also in relation to changes in the productive base and the political sphere. Both went through changes over time that were not simply a result of the unfolding of internal possibilities, and not simply either a matter of conflict with one another. Without a link to economic and political changes, historical analysis appears caught at the level of textbook simplicities. This means above all taking account of the mode of production, of the relation of ideologies and philosophies to changing forces and relations of production.

It also has to be noted that at the cultural-ideological level itself, 'Buddhism' and 'Brahmanism' were not the only factors in Indian society. There have been other important cultural-philosophical-religious trends, including other parts of the samana tradition, such as Islam which was influential for over a millennium, Christianity influential in the last two centuries, as well as the secular modern philosophies of Marxism and liberalism. These have been crucial in and of themselves, and in their linkages with Brahmanism and Buddhism.

In other words, we would suggest that Ambedkar's formulation of the Buddhism–Brahmanism conflict should be taken much in the spirit of Weber's effort to add cultural–ideological factors to explanation in terms of economic factors.

With this in mind, the formulation does provide a crucial insight into the processes of Indian social–historical development. For over a millennium, Buddhism and Brahmanism, as the major contending philosophical-religious ideologies in India, fostered very different types of individual behaviour and social order. The period of the dominance of Buddhism was one of trade and cities, where a vibrant commercial society and the enthusiastic involvement in global trading networks linked India to distant Rome and China. It is also not accidental that this early period was one of scientific investigation and historical questioning, debate, openness to ideas. The final triumph of Brahmanism in the last half of the first millennium resulted in a good deal of stagnation at the 'developmental' level and in a fiercely hierarchical caste society that fixed the masses into unprecedented forms of exploitation.

While the slowdown of trade, resulting from the decline of Rome and dynastic crises in China, played a role in these developments,

we have also seen a primary reason for this triumph of Brahmanism in its ability to forge an alliance with political rulers.[5] Brahmans provided a base of crucial administrative skill, and at the same time gave an ideology that both legitimised rulers as kshatriyas (and often linked them with gods as semi-divine) and freed them from responsibility for providing welfare; their main duty was to enforce varnashrama dharma, while all types of otherwise immoral conduct was legitimised as necessary for rulership, as part of what the Buddhists criticised as 'Kshatriya dharma'.

In the New Millennium

Today, of course, it is a different era. Aside from its role on a world scale, probably today Buddhism can have more to offer India as a nation than ever before. Not least, of course, as Dalits and Bahujans emerge as newly conscious force in India, Buddhism can not only provide inspiration for their struggle (which other philosophies and religions can also do)—it can help all of them regain a sense of their own history. It is perhaps appropriate to close this essay with what is the earliest mention of a Dalit in any Indian literature:

> *Birth does not make an outcaste, birth does not a Brahman make;*
> *action makes a person low, action makes him great.*
> *To prove my case I give just one example here –*
> *the Sopaka Matanga, Candala's son, of fame.*
> *This Matanga attained renown so high and rare*
> *that masses of Brahmans and Khattiyas to serve him were drawn near.*
> *He ascended, so they say, in a chariot divine,*
> *defeating lust and hatred, from passion freed, so high*
> *nor did his birth or caste bar him from paradise!*
> *But born brahmans are there, kin to the mantra-knowers*
> *whose evil deeds expose them again and again,*
> *scorned by the faithful and virtuous, facing a future doom*
> *their brahman birth does not prevent scorn now or later doom* (*Sutta Nipata*, #136–41).

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[5] This is also argued by Weber who states in *The Religion of India* who sees as 'decisive…the fact that Hinduism could provide an incomparable religious support for the legitimation interests of the ruling strata as determined by the social conditions of India' (1958: 18).

This is from the *Vassalasutta*, the 'opposite' of the *Vasetthasutta* on 'what makes a Brahman'. The theme is the familiar Buddhist one, emphasising action not birth. Matanga here is taken as the example of great attainments by a person born in what Brahmanism was then considering to be the lowest caste.

Today in a sense, Matanga's era has come again; the oppressed of the world are demanding as never before equality, access to development and the good life promised by the technological and economic achievements of today, freedom from the oppressions and exploitations that are still so prevalent. If we re-interpret 'paradise' as *Sukhavati*—a joyous land that is not itself the real awakening, but whose social achievements provide conditions in which humans can best realise their capabilities—we may say that this is an important and even possible goal. But with this demand also come new challenges, the horrors as well as the promises of modern technology. The bombings of the World Trade Center in New York city should remind us that the messages of stilling passion and of avoiding attachment to arrogant ideological certainties are perhaps the most important things that need to be learned in the world today.

'I was abused, I was hurt, I was beaten, I was robbed!'
Harbor such thoughts and hatred will never cease.
'I was abused, I was hurt, I was beaten, I was robbed!'
Abandon such thoughts and hatred will end.
For never in this world
Do hatreds cease by hatred.
By freedom from hatred they cease:
This is the eternal dhamma (*Dhammapada* #3–5).

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About the Author

Gail Omvedt has been living in India since 1978, became an Indian citizen in 1983, and works as a freelance writer and development consultant. She has also worked actively with various social movements including the Dalit and anti-caste movements, farmers' movements, environmental movement and specially with rural women.

Besides having undertaken many research projects, Dr Omvedt has been a consultant for FAO, UNDP and NOVIB and has served as a Dr Ambedkar Chair Professor at NISWASS in Orissa, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Pune and an Asian Guest Professor at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen. She is currently a Senior Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and Research Director of the Krantivir Trust.

A prolific writer, Gail Omvedt has published a large number of books including *Dalit Visions* (1975), *Violence Against Women: New Theories and New Movements in India* (1991) and *Dalits and Democractic Revolution* (1994) besides having translated *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography*. She is currently engaged in translating Tukaram, considered to be the greatest Marathi writer of all time.